

TOUCH A FRENCH POM-POM

This new thriller by the author of Gardenias Bruise Easily and No Wooden Overcoat continues the adventures of best-selling novelist Garway Trenton, who little realised the skulduggery that was to ensue that splendid morning he gave the beautiful Frenchwoman Fleur Lemmonier a lift from St. Tropez in his famous Aston Martin, Ming I.

Trenton soon became involved in an amazing web of intrigue when he tried to investigate the curious situation that four entirely different people all had the same peculiar and overriding desire—to touch a French pom-pom.

Books by John Paddy Carstairs

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No Wooden Overcoat
Touch a French Pom-Pom

ART BOOK

Watercolour is Fun

JOHN PADDY CARSTAIRS

*Touch a
French Pom-Pom*



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To
JUMBO and EVE NOBLE,
For Auld Lang Syne

One

IT was the year the women wore bandeaus of chiffon around their straw hats—you know how it is in the South of France, each year there is some sort of fashion-gimmick. She was standing at a 'bus stop wearing one of these hats—she'd chosen one with heliotrope trimming and though she stood there wearing only a bikini and sandals with two suitcases by her side, because it was the South of France no one thought the sight bizarre.

I shot a quick look into my tail mirror and then braked the Aston right speedily. I had not thought the sight so much bizarre as attractive, for she was very beautiful with a long neck and high cheek bones, almond-shaped eyes and a retroussé nose, the kind of girl Jean-Gabriel Dœmergue delighted in painting.

"Would you care for a lift?" I said in my execrable French.

She gave the DB4GT the sort of look a West End hotel receptionist would give you if you asked for a room and had no luggage; alas! a look of grave suspicion. I noticed that the suitcases were good, that the bikini was smart, that her perfume was Schiaparelli's *Si*.

"Thank you," she replied after the car and/or me and/or both had passed muster. I was out of the car and had her luggage aboard before you could say "Wolf".

If I hadn't been so susceptible this adventure would never have happened.

* * * *

I did not at that time find out if she had been on holiday at St. Maxime's where I picked her up or whether she had been thumbing a lift from further along the coast, Le Lavandou, perhaps, I merely enquired.

"Cannes?"

"No. Further, if you are going further," she replied. I smiled.

"Why do you smile?"

"At my good fortune, of course," I lied gallantly. Actually I was thinking of Will Shakespeare's so well-observed statement about female voices; 'Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low, an excellent thing in women.' Too many French females' voices grated.

"How much further? *Nice*?"

"You are going to *Nice*?"

"To the border." I told her.

"Oh that's marvellous!" Her English was almost impeccable and then, every now and then, she peppered it exquisitely with a mispronunciation—not so much a malapropism, as an accentuation of the wrong syllable that I found quite adorable . . . for instance, her 'marvelloose'.

"Are you going into Italy then?" I enquired.

"No. To Villefranche. You know it?"

"Very well. I often stay at the *Welcome*, I told her. Idly I speculated on her visit to Villefranche. She was "better" casting" for the *Reserve*, *Beaulieu*, I thought, though, since she had been waiting for a 'bus near St. Maxime, and was therefore without funds, on second thoughts it seemed the *Reserve* would not have been right. I racked my brain for something about Villefranche that, conversation-wise as the Americans have it, we could discuss.

"Cocteau's Chapel—" I started.

But she dismissed this abruptly with a sudden, "have you a cigarette?"

I indicated the packet in the dashboard pocket and I could tell from her expression it wasn't the brand she smoked. "No Marigny's?" she enquired.

"I smoke Luckies in France, Caporals in England and Abdullas in America," I explained.

"Why?"

"Pure affectation," I explained.

She helped herself to a Lucky, lit it from the dashboard igniter, gave me a sideways glance and said "Why, are you an actor?"

I laughed involuntarily at this and, for a second lost the wheel, causing the driver of an on-coming Dauphine to have palpitations. I grabbed the wheel in time to swerve back to my side of the road, chiding myself.

"My remark was so funny?"

"I thought so."

"What do you do then?" she asked, adding as she

scrutinized the D.B.4, "or don't you have to do anything?"

"I'm a writer," I imparted, "I write novels."

"What is your name?"

"Garway Trenton," I said. If I thought it would make an impact I was mistaken. Pity: my sales in France were good, too.

"What kind of books does Monsieur Trenton write?"

"Monsieur Trenton writes romantic novels."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"Monsieur Trenton must do them well if he runs this kind of car."

"You like her? Her name is Ming II."

"She is *formi*" but what happened to Ming I?"

"Ming I and I once ran out of road," I said. The lady from St. Maxime looked puzzled. I explained that I had had an accident.

"Tell me about it," she said.

I did so. It was a longish story concerning the way in which I had to avoid a child falling off her Dad's bike in front of my car and concluding with a neat stop into a lamp-standard. As we chatted inconsequentially and the Aston covered the distance slowly along the Corniche Issambres and the Corniche d'Or we made up time along the Inférieur Corniche. Then, as we approached Nice and on along the Corniche towards the border I noticed that she had become less calm, she reached out for another cigarette and sat tensed-up, and it wasn't because I was telling my story so well that I had her on tenterhooks over that. Her uneasiness was in some way connected with her destination. We turned off the

main road where an admiring traffic cop made a typically Gallic gesture about the Aston, and we nosed carefully down towards the harbour. I noticed that my guest scanned the bay eagerly. Anchored therein was an American cruiser with two attendant destroyers, some yachts and the usual quota of fish boats, row boats and several stalwarts fishing far out from pedaloes. My companion's disappointment was very noticeable.

"Has someone failed to keep a *rendez-vous*?" I asked her.

She covered her anxiety by answering too quickly, "Thanks to you I am too early."

"Then," I suggested, "let me give you dinner?"

She hesitated.

I said "We could dine on the balcony at the *Welcome*, then you could keep an eye on the water-front."

This seemed to placate her but she remembered I was en route to Menton. She said:

"But I thought you were going into Italy?"

"There's no hurry. I'm joining a party of dears near Ventimiglia," I told her. I thought my current amour, Charity Stockton, would have been mighty incensed to have been classified as a dear. My guest misunderstood.

"How many dears have you got, Monsieur the Writer?"

I laughed and explained the difference between dear and dear. She turned her head and looked at me knowingly.

"I think somehow you have several dears, too!" she observed.

My old friend Guy Galbois at the *Welcome* squeezed us in on to the crowded balcony for dinner. The night, silver-sweetened by the moon and peppered with stars, was a dream. And so was my guest.

"Isn't it time you told me your name?" I said, "after all, I've told you mine."

"I am Fleur Lemmonier," she said.

"Hallo, Lemmonier!" I said, deliberately using her surname. I was sure most people called her by her Christian name, nicely feminine and 'utterly suitable. I was just trying hard to be different. Step right up and call me Smarty Pants.

"'Ullo, Trenton," she retorted. But though she could cut and thrust with assurance, she was still worried about whatever it was that was worrying her!

We ate à la carte, a *rade flambé* with a chablis and followed this with a minute steak, salad and a Pom-mard. During the meal the usual Villefranche itinerant entertainers appeared below—there was the trick-cyclist in the top hat who pretended he was going to fall into the water, there were the flame-eaters, the guitarists and the elderly gentleman in the artistic clothes who practised the ancient art of silhouette, making a profile picture cut out of black paper. I had seen them all many times before but the parade was new to Fleur Lemmonier, who enjoyed them all with anxious intermittent glances seawards. If I had hoped (and of course I had) to hold her attention by my wit, my gaiety and my *savoir-faire*, I had been a prize floperoo. This, of course, only acted as a further spur to my efforts to impress her. I obviously needed

more time though I doubted if the setting for romance could be improved upon.

"When will I see you again, Lemmonier?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Who can say?"

"I mean do you come to London? Or Paris, perhaps?"

"Sometimes." She certainly wasn't making much with the advances on her side.

"What I mean is," I said, repeating it, "when do I see you again?"

"With you in Italy and me who knows where—" She broke off the sentence and shrugged her exquisite shoulders.

"Oh to hell with Italy!" I retorted. "Anyway, I think I'll stay here tonight, if the Galbois' can't fix me up, I'll go to the *Bel Tour* I hate driving at night."

In truth, there was nothing I liked better but I was intrigued by my newly-found friend and interested and maybe a little jealous of her *rendez-vous* which, in my would-be possessive mood, seemed clandestine, disturbing. The *Welcome* was full, so I asked Fleur if she would come with me to the new *Bel Tour*.

"No. I will wait for you here," she said. It was clear she did not want to budge from the quayside. I drove over to then earby *Bel Tour* and was lucky, they had a double room and bath for one night. I left my suitcases in the room, washed, made a grimace at the double bed and went back to the *Welcome*. Of Fleur Lemmonier there was no sign.

I enquired at the hotel but no one seemed to know where she had gone. I walked slowly along peering at

people dining on the quayside. My old friend Charlot Castex the fisherman had not seen her, nor had Jean Cardilis, nor was she at Grandmère Germaine's. Further along Madame Irène shrugged her shoulders when I asked if she had been by. My beautiful French friend had simply disappeared.

Two

DESOLATELY I went back to the *Bel Tour* and had half made up my mind to cancel my room and to drive on into Italy when I noticed that there was an altercation going on outside one of the little shops in the Place St. Georges. An American sailor was in the middle of a shouting, gesticulating group of volubly angry locals. I went across to see what it was all about. It was clear that the sailor was not popular, it was also clear that he couldn't reply to the accusations that were being levelled at him. The crowd kept calling him thief and were becoming ugly. The sailor, young, clean and good looking in that collegiate way Americans have, had just made up his mind to try and fight his way out when I said, in English:

"What's the trouble, sailor?"

He seemed pleased to have found someone he could understand.

"Nothing, but get me out of here before the Shore Patrol grabs me, sir."

"They say you stole something."

The sailor hesitated, then, seeing a U.S. Navy Patrol car stop down at the quayside, quickly blurted out,

"It was only a 'photo. A girl's 'photo. Get me out of here!" he pleaded.

I turned to the crowd, quickly deciding how to play it. For their benefit I laughed and, I mocked the sailor.

"This Yankee needed female company—so what did he do? He stole a girl—well, a paper girl! He stole a girl's 'photo. That's all!"

A few of them laughed. I took out a fifty New Franc note.

"Look!" I said. "*Entente cordiale*. I'll buy the Yankee a pin-up. Who owned the 'photo?"

A sad little shop-keeper stepped forward.

"I do, Monsieur," he said. "But it was no pin-up. It was my daughter."

There was a hearty laugh at this. The little shop-keeper tried to explain.

"What I mean is . . ." he began fumblingly but I interrupted him with a "Surely you can have your daughter photographed again?"

"But it was just an ordinary photo. Not even in her bathing costume," the bewildered shop-keeper said. "Why should he steal this?"

I turned for an explanation, but the sailor only answered in a voice hoarse with anxiety.

"Can I get to hell out now, sir?"

"Is it O.K.? Is it a sale?" I asked the little shop-keeper. The fifty franc note proved too much of a temptation. He took it pseudo-reluctantly.

"All right," he said.

"O.K. sailor, take it on the lam!" I suggested.

The young sailor looked me straight in the eye.

"Thanks," he said. "If I kin do the same for you some time. . . ."

He pushed his way quickly through the crowd. I thought 'I don't see myself swiping some girl's photo unless, perhaps, it was of Mylene Demongeot,' but I let it pass. The Shore Patrol car drove up and a belligerent petty-officer hurriedly stepped out.

"Hey! What's going on around here?"

"Salvation Army meeting, C.P.O. Care to join us?" I asked.

The rest of the naval picket reached him. They were wearing the official black armlets with the S.P. yellow lettering.

"Wise guy, eh? What was that sailor doing—making trouble? Where'd he go? Give, buster!"

"One question at a time, chief," I requested.

"Lissen, mister—" he spluttered.

"Lieutenant-Commander," I corrected him. I didn't think it necessary to add "Retired". But I had caught him off balance so I followed up my temporary victory and said:

"It was nothing, was it, *mes amis*?" I turned to the crowd. I spoke in French again to the crowd. "Here is another Yankee looking for a paper doll! Have you another daughter, Monsieur?" I asked the shop-keeper.

The crowd laughed good-humouredly. I said good night to them and they turned away and began to disperse. "Good night, chief!" I said and I, too, strolled away, leaving the chief petty officer baffled

by the turn of events. I heard him muttering under his breath. It sounded like "interfering limey bastards" but I could have been wrong.

* * * *

I strolled back to the *Bel Tour*. En route the little boites were doing a thriving trade. Whenever an American warship dropped anchor in the bay the women from Nice were rushed quickly into the area, over-night restaurants with such Gallic names as Les Cigales and L'Hirondelle became Mom's Place and The Hamburger Joint. Small hotels where before one had seen on the balcony the underwater flippers now sported the provocative bras of the joy-peddlers from town. From a hundred doorways the disced voice of Elvis Presley deposed that of Charles Aznavour.

Overnight the entire stock of American jive records were purchased from the Nice dealers and then rushed to Villefranche. From dawn till dusk crates of Coca-Cola arrived for the bistros where Vin de Provence was normally imbibed. Cheap champagne and Italian spaghetti were ordered (many of the American sailors were hazy geographically). And surprisingly, as if by magic, stalls selling hot dogs appeared on the quayside, and in normally quiet homes, radios now blared forth. It was while musing about the need for noise behind everything today, the radios' background music the absorption that people demanded, that my attention was drawn to the arrival of a smart motor yacht which came round the Cap and adroitly anchored in the bay.

She was a large, smart boat, built for speed, with a pleasant line and a Belgian flag astern. I wondered if the partner in Fleur's assignation was aboard her.

Still smarting slightly in that my male charms had been rebuffed I waited to see if a dinghy made for the shore, but nothing happened, so I made for the *Bel Tour*. Pushing my way through the throng of matelots and their newly-found girl friends, I wondered why the largest female bottoms were inevitably in trousers. The wrong shaped women were inevitably the ones who wore them! I ordered a brandy and with a cigar sat on the balcony of my room at the *Bel Tour* where I could keep an eye on the yacht but still nothing happened, so I went and had a bath and re-read some of Laurie Lee's delightful *Cider with Rosie* before falling asleep with the light on.

Gentle guitar-strumming awoke me. I glanced at my watch. It was three in the morning. I went out to investigate. Apart from the gentle guitar noise it was quiet in Villefranche, even the Yankee sailors and their girls had retired.

I glanced down at the pavement below to see two young men serenading with guitars. They sang pleasantly and for a brief moment I thought that this was a gag that Fleur Lemmonier had played on me. Then, in the dark I was conscious of a love-locked couple on the next verandah. My romantic chord was touched, avuncularly I beamed at them, until I discovered that they were both female. I felt out of touch in a changing world, I hastily retired.

I don't know how long I slept, but suddenly I was

awakened by an imperative rapping on my door and an insistent "Monsieur! Monsieur!"

I didn't smell burning but I took no chances. I grabbed my trousers and drew them over my pyjama bottoms. I hurried to the door and opened it.

Standing there was the hotel night porter and behind him, now dressed in a striped sweater and cotton trousers was Fleur. She was out of breath and obviously distressed. "Monsieur, cette dame—" but before the porter could complete his story, Fleur had cut in.

"Quick, Trenton! Let me in!" she implored. The pupils of her eyes were dilated with fear. Her whole frame trembled as if she had ague.

"Of course. O.K. porter, thank you!" I said, fishing in my pocket for some *grisbie*. If the porter noticed Fleur was trembling he must have thought it was amorous anticipation. He took my proffered bribe, winked and left us. We withdrew into the room.

I was certainly delighted to see Fleur again but I pretended to chide her. "Look here, Lemmonier—" I began protestingly, but she cut in imploringly,

"Quickly, Garway, quickly!" she said. "For God's sake get me away from here."

"But, Fleur—"

"You've got to help me!"

Three

THERE was no doubt about it, Fleur was quite desperate.

"Tell me what's happened," I said.

"There's no time to tell you now. No time for anything except you must help me to leave Villefranche."

"But why?"

"Get me away, quickly. Now!"

"Where to?"

"Drive anywhere!" she requested, "but hurry!"

"O.K." I put on some shoes over sockless feet, slipped some money in my pocket, grabbed the Aston keys and hurried Fleur to the door. I was about to bundle her out when she stopped me.

"Is there no other way?" she asked in desperation. The voice that I had admired earlier was now harsh, fearful.

"Only over the balcony," I said.

She rushed out on to it to judge the distance to the ground. The weird lovers from the next apartment had disappeared. The world was quiet again. Fleur turned to me.

"Can you make a rope?"

"Who do you think I am—James Bond?" I joked.

"Can you?" she repeated.

"Well. . . ." I began lamely. "I don't really know if this works. I've read about it in books and seen it on the movies." I began to pull the sheets off the bed. "I remember a fellow called Grafton-Cholmondeley tried it at his house South Lawn at Eton once, but the knot didn't hold and he broke his collar-bone but . . ."

"Hurry, please!"

Inexpertly I knotted the sheets. The whole thing seemed extremely dicey. Why was I so vulnerable over the female of the species? "I'll go first, in case it's a bust," I said.

I lashed the sheet to the bed and pushed the bed to the wall parallel to the balcony. I swung over, even if it didn't hold it wasn't so far to fall and it could be I could catch Fleur when she jumped after me.

There was a frightening tearing sound as the sheet, indignant at the idea of supporting my weight, emitted this protest. I fell on to the cobble stones with a grunt, but I was only bruised. I got up and held out my arms for Fleur. She came a little way down the torn sheet but this promptly gave way and she dropped into my arms: we fell over and lay there out of breath. Above us there was a noise and laughter. Derisively, one in mens' pyjamas, the two lassies from the next room peered down at us. Ruefully we got to our feet and hurried under the shelter of a cafe canopy.

"The car! Where's your car?" Fleur Lemmonier asked shrilly.

"Parked in front of the hotel—"

"Oh!" Her disappointment was immense.

"Don't worry," I said placatingly, "I can stroll round and collect it. Who is going to stop me?" I added boldly, but I wasn't feeling at all heroic, and I thought one tiny leprechaun with a fierce moustache has only to jump out and say "Boo" and I would have to be revived with burnt feathers under my elegant nostrils.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Fleur Lemmonier shrank back into the shadows.

Puffing out my chest I strolled as nonchalantly as I could to the front of the hotel. There, among the lesser breeds, stood the Aston, like some rich jewel in an Ethiope's ear, not a sign of any person. I essayed a whistle—a little something from Flower Drum Song but I doubt if it was recognisable—and I got into the Aston, inserted the ignition key and turned it. If I expected a loud bang and a black face no such thing happened; instead—in the words of the thriller boys—the engine instantly purred (though, in truth, it usually needed a few minutes warm-up).

I drove round to the quay side of the hotel half expecting that Fleur would have been kidnapped, but she hurried out of the darkness and quickly got in.

"Fleur," I began, "there wasn't a soul there—are you sure you want—?"

But quickly she broke in with a "Don't argue, drive!"

"O.K.!"

I zoomed Ming II up the hill past the Provençale and on to the Corniche.

"Left or right? Nice or Monte?" I asked.

"Monte!" she said. "But fast—faster!"

It was nearly dawn and I gave Ming her head. We shot rapidly along the main road towards the border, slightly held up by the numerous S-bends. Often Fleur turned to see if we were being followed.

I dropped speed at the Principality at the request of a sleepy but elegant musical comedy, white-helmeted, white-gloved traffic cop (why did all coppers instantly flag me down, no matter how slowly I was driving?). We drove through Monte where there was some traffic, despite the early hour. I always get a bang going through Monte, but that dawn it wasn't quite the same kind of bang. We were through the town en route to Menton when it happened. I'd seen a 300 S.L. stooge up behind us. It had seemingly come in from a side street and certainly hadn't been tailing us. On arrival at Monte Fleur had also been lulled into a false security and hadn't turned back for quite a while. If I had thought her story—or lack of story—nonsense I was soon to realize that she had been telling the truth. There was a loud report and I thought a tyre had gone, but we kept on our even keel. There was further report and a sharp shower of glass as my nearside mirror was splintered. Fleur dropped to the deck of the car, and for a moment, I thought she was hurt.

I was still momentarily stunned by what had happened and by now the Merc had pulled alongside. A nasty-looking geyser by the driver had a Walther in his hand. He whanged off another shot that ripped the pyjama top that I was still wearing and grazed my

skin. I positively boggled and quickly trod on the accelerator pedal. An on-coming 'bus, tooting obscenities, forced him to drop behind me. I'd recently exchanged my D.B.2 for a new 4, and I pulled away from him.

Contrary to my expectation, instead of panic, the sudden excitement, as if it brought things to an emotional climax, had steadied Fleur.

She was quite jocular. "Have they gone, Trenton?" she enquired.

"Not exactly—they are still tailing but British craftsmanship remains supreme!" I gagged.

"Eh?"

"I mean they are out of cannon range *but* I don't know what will happen at the border."

Fleur made a grimace.

"Are there police there?" she enquired.

"Yes, indeed. Sleepy, perhaps, but effective, I would imagine." I replied.

"Then we have nothing to fear."

"No comment!" I retorted.

We moved up the hillside to the border. I noticed that the Merc slowed up, too.

A sudden panic assailed me.

"There is, of course, the matter of passports." I said. "I certainly haven't got mine."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Fleur exclaimed, "neither have I!"

"If we can get past the French Customs, your friends will be convinced we are going into Italy. And they look as if they don't want or *can't* cross the border—I must

try a little bluff," I said, adding, "by the way, you will tell me sometime what this is all about?"

"*Vraiment*. Of course, but not just now, *please*," Fleur requested.

"Very well."

An affable, yawning policeman approached Ming II and made suitable appreciative grunts, then frowned at the broken mirror. That I was wearing a pyjama-top was not even an eccentricity in that informally eccentric part of the globe. I bid him good-day and I assured him we had no contraband. He frowned at the broken mirror and indicated the Control office.

I re-started Ming's engine and left it running. I walked into the Control office and greeted another sleepy policeman. I had put on a pair of flannel trousers when Fleur had banged on my door at the *Bel Tour*. Expecting a miracle I thrust my hands in the pockets. There was nothing there. I tried the back pocket and drew out a first class season ticket I had purchased for my sister (Great Missenden to Paddington) which I had clottishly forgotten to send on to her. I thought 'the very thing'!

Casually I strolled to the door and looked out, while he gazed in perplexity at the season ticket. I walked to the car. Fleur was doing her nut with the other policeman. I got in the car, grinned at the cop who winked in reply and I drove quickly to the Italian Control further up the hill. If there were bullets this time, they wouldn't be from the same source. I held my breath.

We reached the Control barrier without incident. I

got out and walked towards the Italian police. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed that the Merc had begun to turn. At this moment an indignant French police officer hurried out of the Control office and shouted excitedly at his colleague and pointed at me. My heart sank.

"Are we winning?" Fleur enquired.

"Touch and go at the moment," I murmured, trying to appear unflustered. If the Merc smelt a rat it was fearful me!

"What is this 'touch and go'?" Fleur enquired.

"I'll explain later—probably in the Bastille," I retorted, watching the gesticulating Frenchmen and the departing Merc. If the occupants looked back they would see I was in trouble.

I waved cordially at the astonished Frenchmen who were now indicating, with much gesturing, that I should return to the French side. I noticed with apprehension that one of them was unbuttoning his revolver holster. But good fortune attended us. The Merc made off and disappeared round a bend in the road.

Urbanely I apologised to the Italian police, indicated that I didn't understand why but something must be wrong and I backed the Aston down the small strip of "neutral" territory, to the French side. Several more sleepy Control officers had appeared. The one holding the season ticket ran across to the car and waved it in front of my face.

"What's the idea? What's the meaning of this?" he yelled. I decided to continue to play it dumb. I grinned like an idiot and said, "That's right, my means of identification."

"What is this scrap of paper? It means nothing, M'sieur. Where are your passports?"

"Passports?" I repeated the word as if I'd heard it *somewhere* before. Then I reacted brightly. "Ah! Passports!"

"Exactly! Passports!"

"Oh are they necessary? They are at the hotel—at Villefranche," I explained gaily.

This appeared to mollify the officer, the others still yawning, examined the car with interest and Fleur with even more interest. It was quite clear now that I was just another crack-pot Englishman.

"Do you wish us to go back for them?" I asked the officer. My good-natured, cretin act paid off. By now, he was the perfect government official—his duty had to be performed but with an urbaneness that was charming, a courtesy that was olde-worlde, a gentle manner that was positively irresistible.

"If M'sieur would be so kind," he said.

"Delighted. Simply delighted," I told him. I turned the Aston while Fleur flashed him a smile that brought sex back to his mornings.

"We will see you later, then, sir," he said.

"*Mais oui!*" I retorted heartily. I revved the D.B.

"Just one minute, M'sieur!" He stopped me. "Your *papier!*" he said. He then handed it back to me.

"Oh ta!" I said, pseudo-gratefully. "Ta indeed!"

"Excuse sir, but this *papier*, I have never seen the like before. What is it?" he enquired.

I simply couldn't resist it.

"It's my sister's railway season ticket, officer," I said. And with a smile that matched that of Fleur, I gunned the engine and we shot rapidly back into France.

Four

“WELL! Well!” Fleur murmured. “How do you say it—‘never a dull minute’?”
“Moment’,” I corrected her. “Yep. Never a dull moment,” I added. “I hope your *amigos* aren’t hiding round the bend. That Cyclopean hunk of metal they pointed at me looked very nasty, very nasty indeed.”

“I don’t understand you, Trenton,” Fleur said.

“That’s not surprising,” I retorted, “sometimes I don’t understand myself!”

With considerable trepidation I eased Ming II round the bend in the road, but the enemy were nowhere in sight.

“For safety I think we’ll turn up at Rocquebrune and go back for the passports via La Turbie.”

“Good idea!” Fleur agreed.

“I take it you still want to cross into Italy?” I thought Fleur Lemmonier hesitated for a second.

“Yes please, as soon as possible. But, now that the excitement is over—”

“*Temporarily* over,” I corrected her.

“O.K. temporarily—I can’t pronounce it . . .”

"You can *and* divinely!"

"You like my accent?"...

"Enchanting."

"Thank you!"

"*De Nada*—it's nothing. Do go on!"

"I would love a cup of coffee."

"Me, too—*and* a croissant! We'll keep our eyes open. Sooner or later we'll find a cafe enterprising enough to be open."

But on the *Moyen Corniche* at La Turbie everything was still shut. Nor could we get anything at the self-consciously olde-worlde town of Eze, perched precariously on the top of the Corniche above Cap d'Ail.

"We'd better chance nipping down to La Fitte," I suggested. "I'm so hungry I could eat one of your pursuers," I added. Fleur grimaced.

"I'm not *that* hungry," she said, "but it's a good idea."

As we drove down the connecting mountain road I decided now was a good a time as any to quiz Fleur.

"This," I suggested, "is the time for you to unburden."

"Eh? *Comment?*"

"Give. 'The facts, lady, I just want the facts'!" I said pseudo-tough, reminiscent, I loped, of Joe Friday.

For some reason Fleur Lemmonier decided it was now her turn to play it dumb.

"What is it you want, Trenton? *Je ne comprends pas.*"

"Now, now! Don't tell me your English has suddenly failed you."

"Trenton, you must trust me," she said.

"Yes?"

"Yes, please."

"Does that mean you don't want to tell me why you are being chased by fierce-looking hombres, waving cannon—not only waving the ruddy things but whanging them off?" I turned jovially to Fleur only to find her beautiful almond-shaped eyes filled with tears.

"Trenton," she said, "please, please trust me." The music of her voice lulled me Lorelei-like, into a fatuous acquiescence. Her pretty face had acquired a Madonna-like expression which was innocence personified. I simply *had* to trust her.

"You mean, you don't want to explain anything?"

"No, Garway," she said, cleverly dropping my surname for the moment to prove her complete sincerity. "Not now. But I will. I promise I will. All I want you to do is carry me away to safety."

Her command of English was positively shattering, instead of "drive" she used "carry", and I had a mental picture of myself, Sir Galahad, horsed and sword-armed, with she, the Lady Genevieve (was it?) behind me holding on to my waist as we rode through the forest, I her champion and defender of her unsmirched honour. De da de da de da! Was this the greatest actress since Bernhardt? Was I being hoaxed? I didn't know and, for one halcyon moment, I didn't care!

"O.K. Honeypot, you win!" I told her.

She rewarded me with one hell of a smile. I felt just as renewed by it as the French custom official must have felt at the border. The thought of him made me ask her.

"What about your passport and those smart suitcases—where did you leave them?"

"At the *Nightingale*, Villefranche," she said. She thought for a moment, then suggested, "I wonder if it would be better if you went for them—without me?"

"A good idea," I said. "Look! Suppose I leave you at some *rendez-vous*, I'll pick up your stuff and mine and come back for you."

"Suppose you are followed?"

"I had thought of that but I've got an idea!"

* * * *

We drove down the winding road from Eze back to the Lower Corniche, and I spent a lot of time looking in the remains of the tail-mirror but there was no doubt our pursuers had thought we were in Italy. Nevertheless, soon they would realize we might, at some time or another, go back for our luggage. Conjecture was useless, the only thing to do was to play it the way one felt best about it.

There was a beach cafe at La Fitte I knew to be open all the time, and I also knew that the food was good. We swung off the road and into the parking place alongside the cafe. It was called the *Trianon*, and it had the inevitable chicness that almost all Gallic cafes had. It was slap on the beach and I had often in the past wished that the patron had installed a few bedrooms; it was an ideal spot on an ideal if small beach. The patron, though unshaven, was up and pleased to see us. I couldn't possibly hide the Aston so that Fleur and I were sitting ducks should her enemies

return; we were simply backing the hunch that they had nipped back to Villefranche.

I knew that the *Trianon* could whip up quite an omelette and though Fleur thought this "Typically British", and said she would settle for a *croissant*, when my omelette arrived and proved to be excellent, femininely she helped herself to half of it.

By the time we had completed our excellent breakfast there were quite a number of people on the beach. I glanced round and noticed they followed the inevitable pattern. Near us, taking coffee, sat the inevitable elderly American couple "seeing Europe". They were decidedly earnest and while she beamed at the world with the intensity of a skull, he perused the Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* for information, searching desperately and accepting utterly (like Mister Fielding's characters in *Rape Upon Rape*) every profundity as if the editor were—to mix authors—Sir Oracle, nodding his agreement as he read. This desire for "awareness" was sad in its uselessness. Yet, one could not be hard on so good-intentioned people.

My anger turned instead to the inevitable fool-parent dunking the terrified child in the sea and frightening it of swimming probably for ever. I glared, too, at the owner of the large Alsatian who let it make itself very comfortable on the best piece of beach and pretended it hadn't happened. There were also the other dog owners present who demanded complete obedience from their canines and gave no affection in return for this, France seemed to have its full quota of these. There was the young lady on the Lilo with the

fanatical determination to go back looking coloured (it always seemed ironic to me that to be smart you went home black and the poor black wanted to be white!) This character (and there was always at least one on every beach) inevitably lay as if in a trance with blue eye shades over her lids and a small radio blaring out French squeeze-box music of the corniest kind.

There was too, the selfish house owner who marched to the water's edge and tipped his bin of refuse straight into the sparkling clear blue Mediterranean and when challenged shrugged his shoulders and blamed the local drainage. He probably had a point, for it was noticeable on most beaches, that there appeared an obscene trickle that often became a rivulet of evil-smelling foul-looking fluid that gurgled revoltingly from a pipe into the sparkling water.

There was the inevitable fat female who smothered herself in Sol Ambre and then threw the bottle against the rocks where it splintered and cut the next child who searched for *orcins*. And there were, too, the inevitable water-skiers who with their attendant noisy motor launches, exhibited their talents near the shore so that they would be clearly observed. *They never* went far out.

There was the raucous family throwing a large rubber ball which bounced over everyone and there was the funny man who splashed those who weren't bathing.

And, despite all these irritations, the sun splashed over-all in sparkling splendour and somehow imparted a certain tolerance which made one praise the charm of the Côte d'Azur.

"Suddenly you are very quiet," Fleur said.

I told her of what I had been thinking. She took it as a personal insult.

"And what about Brighton?" she retorted accusingly. Hastily I changed the subject.

When we had completed breakfast and I had paid and thanked the *patron*, we drove back to Roquebrune. The sun was well and truly up now and there was activity in the small town.

We drove up to the *Calanque d'or* and I parked the D.B. with some ostentation outside the front. We walked into the hotel, nodded to the reception clerk and made for the restaurant, we walked through the restaurant and out to the back of the hotel. We walked until we found a garage. The proprietor had no available car but he obligingly telephoned a taxi rank. While waiting we stayed in the garage, just for safety. I was still just a little angry that Fleur would not impart the story of her troubles; it would have given me a better idea how to weigh-up the measure of our adversaries; though, revolver shots in the streets of Menton had given me a rough idea of their intentions!

When the taxi turned up, I drove Fleur to the Hotel *Cap-Martin*. I told the taxi to wait. I reckoned that our bizarre clothes and lack of luggage would be compensated by the appearance of the Aston. This surmise proved to be right. I hired Fleur a room and told her to stay there and lie doggo until I returned. I told her that if anything suspicious happened to ring me at the *Negresco*, Nice, and leave a message. They knew me well at the *Negresco*.

Fleur nodded quickly, listened to my instructions and gave me the benefit of those beautiful almond eyes. I went all blah and smiled weakly down at her.

"Oh Trenton," she said in that delicious voice, "do take care, won't you?" She fingered one of my pyjama buttons and said: "I have known you for only a few hours, but I've grown—how do you say it—very fond of you."

I looked down at her appealing up-turned face. Was this the face of a phoney? No, rather the face that launched a thousand Astons.

"I've grown very fond of you, too, Lemmonier," I said huskily.

I thought of Charity Stockton, my current *amour-not-so-propre* awaiting me at Alassio.

Fleur, still looking up provocatively at me, feline, silent, *sensationnelle*, waited, expectantly, surely. . . .

I kissed her quickly on the forehead and she made a grimace.

"'Bye, Lemmonier!" I said and abruptly turned and left.

Five

I NOW took the taxi back through Monte, past Cap d'Ail, through Beaulieu and along to Villefranche once more. We turned left and down the steep hill and along to the Hotel *Bel Tour*. I told the taxi driver to wait and I went in. The concierge was still on duty, and he gave me an outsize in knowing winks: it puzzled me all the way up to my room. It was only when I reached the door I realized that he had, to paraphrase the words of Picasso in his play *Desire by the Tail*, "lit the candle of sin with Fleur's charms." I thought "*Mon Dieu*, if wishes were horses. . . !"

I was about to open my bedroom door when I had a premonition that something was wrong. I was always having trouble when I opened doors. I threw the door open and leapt back into the safety of the corridor. There was a sudden report and I instantly fell flat on my face. I lay there waiting for a further report only to realize that the noise I had heard was a car backfire. Crimson-faced and glad I hadn't been observed I got to my feet and peered into my room. My premonition, however, had not been completely wrong—my room was a shambles. All the contents of my suitcases had

been strewn on the bed, books opened and paper scattered everywhere. Because I wrote in long-hand I needed reams of stationery; there had been plenty for the intruder to scatter—and scatter he had. My Fleet Air Arm mascot, a goliwog called Ginsberg already the victim of bullet wounds, garotting and even the recipient of a small coffin for the deep six, was now neatly split down the middle and his stuffing had spilled on to the writing table.

"Tut! Tut! Poor old Ginsberg!" I murmured. "Your stuffing is showing!" I chucked systematically and picked him up.

"Hm!" I mused. "You're the wrong sex for a Caesarean, so I wonder what they wanted?" I glanced round the room, wondering if there would be some clue. The intruder or intruders had been thorough. I thought 'It can't be the police. Fleur can't have been tangling with the law for they would have stopped us at the border or nabbed me now.' My eye travelled over the debris, but I couldn't find any reason for this mess.

I remembered our attempted escape by the twisted bed sheets. Ignominiously I hauled up the dangling torn sheet and pushed the bed back into its normal position. I wondered if they had found my passport. I'm funny about passports—I like to keep mine and, having a suspicious mind—that's what happens if you write fiction—I had concealed it. Hastily I went to see if it was still there. I crossed into the bathroom and looked into the lavatory paper receptacle. There, behind the neat packet of paper, was my passport. Gleefully I

pushed it into my back pocket and then went back to pack.

I didn't bother to be methodical, I felt speed was more important than a correctly packed O.E. t^{ie}, but I conceded a sports shirt in place of my pyjama top, and I simply pushed my goods into the suitcases and snapped the lids down. I rang down for the porter, and I lit a Lucky and puffed contemplatively, considering how I would attack the problem of laying my hands on Fleur's luggage at the nearby Hotel *Nightingale*. When the bags had been collected, I went down to the lobby. The concierge was just going off duty; his expression when I explained that the sheets had been torn and that I wished to pay had to be seen to be believed.

I think he murmured "*Vive le sport!*" but I hadn't time to take him apart. Icily I told him to put the bags in the taxi which I had kept waiting. If the staff were surprised that the Aston was missing they did not show it. I was going to try another sneak in the back way at the *Nightingale*, then I decided that, unless the hotel was in on the plot (and, if they were, I was a goner, anyway), I had nothing to fear if I played the scene boldly and matter-of-factly. In consequence I drove in my taxi up to the *Nightingale* and marched straight in and told the reception clerk that I had come to take Mlle. Lemmonier's cases and to settle her bill. I could not be sure if his surprise was genuine. He said: "But I don't think Mlle. Lemmonier is up yet, sir."

"Oh yes. She's gone along to a villa owned by some friends of mine," I lied.

The receptionist shrugged his shoulders, rang

Fleur's room several times and then turned to me.

"Have you some authority for removing her things?" he enquired.

I nodded and I produced a note written by Fleur. The receptionist read it and appeared satisfied. He turned for her key, found it missing and turned to me enquiringly.

"It must be in the door," I explained. "Mlle. Lemmonier did not take it with her."

Again he shrugged his shoulders. He was bored with the whole thing and I could not be sure if this was all a big act. Anyway, to make the whole thing more "correct", he came with me to the lift and up to Fleur's room. The key was in the lock. He rapped on the door, rapped again and receiving no answer, went in. I followed. Fleur's room had not been touched. The bed was made and the room could easily have been let exactly as it was. The receptionist turned to me for an answer. I couldn't give him one. I smiled weakly and quickly went into the bathroom. It was undisturbed. Of Fleur's suitcases there was no sign. I went back into the bedroom and blusteringly challenged:

"Where are Mlle. Lemmonier's suitcases?"

The receptionist was not a bit put out by my menacing disposition.

"Where indeed, M'sieur?" He enquired pointedly.

There was a long pause while we both tried to sum one another up.

"Furthermore, sir, where is Mlle. Lemmonier?"

"I've already told you, staying with friends of mine at their villa."

"What is their name, sir? Where is this villa?" The receptionist had the temerity to ask me coldly. I was pretty narked. I thought wildly searching for the fictitious name of my friends and their villa. Then I remembered that Somerset Maugham lived on the Cap Ferrat just opposite Villefranche. I would presume on the slightest acquaintance. I blurted out quickly, "The Villa Mauresque, with my friend Mr. Maugham."

This appeared to mollify the receptionist.

"Ah. M'sieur Somairset," he⁴⁰ said. "M'sieur Maug-ham."

"Exactly. Now give me Mlle. Lemmonier's bill, please."

The receptionist sighed. We went to the lift and down to the reception desk. All the time I was puzzling, "Was the hotel in on the plot"? I doubted it, if so why hadn't they nabbed me? Or, if they had the suitcases, was the MacGuffin—the Gimmick—the Unknown thing they were after—in the suitcases? Yet, if this were so, and they had what they wanted, why had they followed Fleur and fired at us? Or could it be they *thought* she had the suitcases² with her and only went back to her room to take them *after* the race to the border? A further possibility occurred to me, what if Fleur had herself disposed of the suitcases? I realized that pursuing these chimerical flights of fancy was getting me nowhere fast.

I paid Fleur's account and bluffingly I said icily:

"You have not heard the last about Mlle. Lemmonier's missing luggage!"

The receptionist sneered back. "If M'sieur is quite

certain Mlle. Lemmonier left her suitcases, perhaps he will return *with* Mlle. Lemmonier *and* a gendarme."

"A ~~very~~ good idea!" I retorted huffily, and I marched out of the hotel and got straight into my taxi.

A smiling stranger sat in the taxi and before I had a chance to protest, he had rammed the business end of a pistol in my ribs.

"Good morning, M'sieur!" he said, almost purring. "I am sure you will not mind if I share your taxi."

I tried to "act nonchalant."

"It depends if you are going the same way as I am."

This tickled the newcomer. He laughed, exposing a mouthful of black teeth. His hair cut, a sort of French version of a crew cut, was dark and smeared down on to his forehead. His eyes were fanatical. His breath foul. He was dressed in a nondescript blue shirt and cotton trousers. He was about the last person one would suspect of carrying a pistol, he looked like a modern painter who had lots of pacifism but no talent, or more likely the sort of chap who posed for "feelthy" pictures (assuming, of course, one had seen a "feelthy" picture). I instantly nicknamed him the Fanatic.

As the taxi moved off as soon as I had got in I was not surprised to find when he turned to see me, that the driver was a different man. I looked intently at the taxi and realized that even *that* had been switched. Someone had either paid off my man or driven off with him. I hadn't any more time for musing, my captor dug the gun against my ribs more firmly.

" 'It depends if you are going the same way I am', " he repeated my "joke" then laughed again, almost

hysterically. I wondered if he were hopped up on "snow".

"Very nice, M'sieur, very nice indeed. Let us say we are *both* going the same way." He imparted this news with a smile but it really hadn't a lot of gaiety in it—as cold, you could say if you cared for similes, as a polar bear's behind.

"It's a fair cop," I said, I hoped urbanely.

Six

I had expected a long drive to a secret hide-out up in the Alps Maritime, instead, to my surprise, we drove a short way up the hill and stopped at the *Café Edouard VII*. This was a well-known local brothel with a façade of an ordinary café.

Often in the past I had been amused at the sight of the “naice” English maiden aunts who had taken coffee and *croissants* on the outside not dreaming of the carnal cavortings taking place within.

As we drove up, my captor spoke to me again and this time without the accompanying smile.

“M’sieur, if you so much as raise your voice an octave, I will not hesitate to kill you,” he said.

An octave? He surely didn’t mean that? I didn’t feel he wanted me to query his English so I let it go.

“Ta ever so!” I retorted facetiously.

“Perhaps you doubt this, M’sieur? But I am already a wanted man and therefore I have no scruples. They can only guillotine me once.”

“A point well taken,” I replied.

“Right, then. We are going straight into the *Edouard VII*.”

I couldn't resist cutting in with a "What would my mother say?"

But my fanatical friend was not amused.

"*Ta bouche!*" he snapped. "When we step out of the taxi make for the door and go in without a murmur."

"O.K."

"Of course," my captor added, his malignant sense of humour returning, "if you needed my help, that is, looked a little tipsy—that might help the illusion."

"Act drunk, you mean?"

"Exactly."

"What, no talent scout?" I quipped. "However, I always did want to be an actor!" I said.

I remembered Fleur's question when I talked about cigarettes and affectation. "Why. Are you an actor?"

I was brought back to reality by the Fanatic warningly imparting a final admonition.

"Do not think that by stumbling against me you can grab my gun. My friend the driver is also armed."

"I'll be good!" I didn't fancy a large hole in my carcass at so short a range.

As the taxi stopped I noticed a group of American sailors who had presumably had night passes (and I mean night passes), breakfasting outside the cafe. I gave—I thought—a passable imitation of an inebriate as I got out of the taxi, "helped" by the armed Fanatic who so solicitously grabbed my arm.

Despite the danger—the irony of the situation appealed to me—there was the sun shining, the blue, blue Mediterranean grinning below, with the Yankee sailors having breakfast, and an air of delightful

tranquillity over all, and there was I being hustled into some gangsters' hideaway at gun-point, with the prospect of a terrible beat-up and maybe even the deep six, for I reckoned my expectation of life then and there could be reduced to a matter of minutes—these men were lethal. A dismal prospect particularly as I didn't know for what reason I might be due for measurement for the wooden overcoat. And all this thanks to a pretty girl standing in the sun in a bikini and a straw hat trimmed with chiffon with two suitcases waiting for Mr. Sucker.

By now Mr. Sucker was being pushed by the Fanatic and the driver up the stairs, pushed in as rough a manner as I had received in many a long day—and, finally upon reaching the landing, I received a hefty kick in the small of the back that sent me reeling and gasping for breath—a kick reminiscent of an occasion in Morocco. I soon realized the full treatment was about to start. My captors pulled me to my feet and half-dragged me along the corridor. I remembered the instructions we had received in the F.A.A. if we had to bail out and were nabbed, "Tell them only your name, rank and number." "Yes!" I thought, "that was Geneva Convention stuff. This isn't going to be like that at all, at all."

The driver proceeded me to a door, pushed it open and then with his chum thrust me inside. I half fell on to a chair by a wooden table. I looked round the room. It was a typically small-hotel type bedroom save for the table, with the usual furnishings, religious reproductions on the wall and the shutters closed. On

the table surprisingly was a gramophone, and, even more surprisingly, sitting on the corner of the table was a Senegalese girl, age about twenty, of incredible beauty. She wore a specially tailored man's check shirt, and jeans with flies down the front. Instead of an open-neck or even a tie, the shirt was held together at the top button by a large circular brooch of scarlet brilliants. It certainly didn't jell with the cheeks. Her hair, Bible-black as Dylan Thomas would have called it, was pulled back off her forehead and worn chignon-style. She smiled the same sinister smile my fanatical friend had given me but, whereas his mouth had been full of the dirtiest teeth on the Cote d'Azur, hers surely, must have been the whitest. It was true, her *café au lait* skin helped to contrast the whiteness of those teeth, but there was no doubt that they were *quelque chose*, and as straight and even as newly-set tomb stones.

She addressed the two men asking if there had been any trouble. My French was sufficient to know that she spoke with a kind of accent, perhaps all French coloured from Senegal did. Her voice, like Fleur's, was low and musical. The men told her the capture had been a piece of cake and had gone like clockwork. They called her Louga. It could be that had been her home town.

The girl crossed to me. Despite the precarious situation I was in and the agony from the kick in the back, I could not help being impressed by her loveliness.

I gasped out jerkily, "*Mlle, comme vous êtes ravissante!*"

"*Merçi, m'sieur,*" she replied. And then, just as I thought I'd also made an impression on her, she stubbed out her cigarette on my hand. Charming! I made an

involuntary gasp but if she expected me to cry out she was disappointed. Partly shock and partly determination stopped me from crying out. I noticed the two henchmen had edged forward, now they both had betsy's at the ready one a blue Walther 7.65, the other a .45 Colt of the kind issued to the U.S. armed forces. I could tell that the Senegalese had enjoyed inflicting the pain and that she had reacted to my refusal to bellow with just the slightest dilation of her eyes. Here was a beautiful but terrifying young woman.

"Never mind the compliments, M'sieur," she said. "You are very pretty too. Let us hope you stay pretty."

The words, said so matter-of-factly from that delightfully sensual mouth were quite chilling.

"Meaning?"

Her piercing eyes, great big brown irises and black, black pupils took in my frame. I had been a Wet Bob at Eton, later rowed for Balliol and boxed for the Fleet Air Arm Eight and I was wide enough. She evidently approved. She replied. "Meaning, if you are a good boy, we will get to know one another better."

"Right now more than anything, I'd like to be a good boy," I replied.

"*Bien!* It is very simple. All you have to do is tell me where Fleur Lemmonier is hiding."

I laughed, but there wasn't a lot of fun in it. I said, "You know, M'selle Louga, I had a feeling that that was going to be the sixty-four dollar question," adding jocularly, "*dites-moi*, when does the ravaging begin?"

Seven

“**Q**UITE a pretty boy, in an English way, what a shame,” Louga said softly. She nodded to the two women. One of them promptly switched on the gramophone and a very loud, shrill record started to play. Now I realized why it was there—a charming sound-deadener. The other man crossed to the cheap chest of drawers and took out a metal box with a red cross on it. He brought this back to the table and deliberately opened it so that I could see inside. There were some extremely significant medical operating tools therein. He took out a packet of adhesive plaster—this to stifle my cries, no doubt. All the time this was happening the beautiful Senegalese watched me intently. I tried not to swallow, but I had to. It was the fear of the unknown that was always so much more frightening than the knowledge of what was to be, I had learned from past experience. I looked intently at Mlle. Louga. What devilish, devilish tricks did she delight in? She was, of course, getting her own back for something that men had done to her in the past. I thought I’d chance a little psychiatric treatment.

“Some District Commissioner rape you when you

were twelve?" I hazarded. The effect was electric.

Her arrogance suddenly wilted and for a moment Louga positively faltered. My shot in the dark hadn't been a killer-diller, but it had certainly wounded her.

"What's this?" I added, pressing my advantage, "the moment of truth?"

"Shut his mouth!" Louga spat out. The beautiful steel-like oriental mask had been ripped away and, for a second or two, she was exposed—very female and very vulnerable.

"You hate men because—" Before I could complete my challenge one of the men had slapped a piece of adhesive plaster over my mouth and the other, for good measure, gave me a quick clout with the butt of his .45 on the side of the head. It was a clever blow designed to hurt rather than to knock one out. The pain was intense and I felt blood trickle down my ear and into my shirt. My fanatical friend with the bad teeth crossed to the chest of drawers again and produced a nice line in whipcord—the very strong kind used by water-skiers.

"All right, you English bastard. All right!" Louga said vituperatively. Her eyes blazed hate and she indicated the bed. The men forced me to the bed—but this was to be no matrimonial slap and tickle. Louga was now positively snake-like. She delved her long, artistic hands into the medical box and brought out a pair of long, mean-looking surgical scissors. Had I, I gulped as I considered them, only a moment or two ago found this woman attractive? There was a crude but nevertheless true Americanism saying that when a

man's hair stood on end that's all that did. Now I really was awed.

Louga stood at the table, those big eyes half-veiled by her lids in her fury as she played with the scissors. The two men forced me to the bed. And the band—on the record—played on! I wondered if it were better to be shot than to be tortured. I hoped I had the guts not to betray Fleur Lemmonier, but how *much* could I take? I didn't know. To be shot seemed a poor sort of joke, since I felt I was still in my prime. I'd still a couple of books in my mind that I wanted to write, women I wanted to have, chums I wanted to see. I wanted one more gander at the oak trees in Windsor Great Park and the deer in Richmond; one more game of squash at the RAC with my old F.A.A. gunner Ginger Bier; I wanted to see the almond trees in bloom in Staveley Road, Chiswick, another springtime, and weep a little as the dawn came over Hyde Park, standing with a girl I loved called "Tee", who wasn't for me (but that's another story); some jazz with Chris Barber; a final flip in a teased-out Seafire; see more Japanese films at the National Film Theatre, and the Procession of Boats on the Fourth. A sherry with my former tutor at Balliol. I wanted to hear some Shakespeare at the Old Vic, and watch Fonteyn at the Opera House; a final Private View day at the R.A.—and then I came back to reality! To be tortured—Hm!—Well, there was always the chance the United States Marines might suddenly come to the rescue. There was an infinitesimal chance, whereas to be shot... I was resigned to the torture. Then, almost as if my unsaid

prayers had been heard, the door which was behind Louga was opened softly and, with a pistol in his hand, stood the sailor I had earlier befriended. He coughed politely but the gramophone was playing too loudly for him to be heard.

"Pardon me, folks!" He again spoke politely, but much louder, this nice, clean, shy, young American. Louga swung round and instantly hurled her scissors. They missed but they stuck twanging in the woodwork of the door-jamb.

"Drop those guns!" the sailor shouted in a stentorian voice that commanded instant respect. The two men who had forced me to the bed and were busy securing my arms to the bed rail were in a poor position to argue. The taxi man obediently dropped his gun on to the pillow near my head but my fanatical friend, however, decided to shoot it out. He swung round quickly and fired but I brought my knee up sharply just in time to deflect his arm. Then, grabbing the taxi man's gun, I smashed it down heavily on to his arm forcing him to cry out and to drop his gun.

I was still "wearing" the adhesive plaster so that my thanks to the sailor were muffled but my eyes no doubt sang out my gratitude. Before you could say Simon Templar I had grabbed the other gun and hurried across the room to my rescuer's side. We stood there for a brief moment surveying the scene—the fanatical one and the taxi driver by the bedside, the fanatic groaning at his hurt wrist, and the beautiful Senegalese girl by the table.

"This is gonna hurt!" the sailor said, ripping the

plaster off my mouth as I, two-gun Trenton, covered the three miscreants. The gramophone record ended and continued to spin.

"Just leave it, honey!" commanded the matelot, "and don't start divin' into that box of knives you got there. I figure they're too sharp for this po' southern chile!" His voice seemed such a parody of a southerner, I couldn't be sure if he was pulling Louga's leg—and mine.

"That's a mighty pretty girl, mister," he said to me, still pointing his pistol at her. It seemed a small pistol and I wondered if it was U.S. Navy issue for special emergencies.

"I liked the cut of her jib, too," I said, using the past tense. "But that beautiful butterfly's got a waspish disposition. What do you say we lam out of here?" I suggested.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to carve 'em a little?" the sailor suggested. Again I couldn't be sure if he was serious. I noticed the taxi driver stiffen apprehensively but the moaning fanatic and Mlle. Louga merely glared contemptuously.

"No time for carving," I quipped back, feeling much better despite the kick in the back, the cigarette-stubbed hand and the clunk on the side of the head, "but if they were hog-tied, it would give us a head start," I suggested.

"We're not going any place except down the stairs, I've got me a bunch of guys down there'll shore settle these folks' hash," the Yank replied.

"We'll meet you with a Tommy, if you return!"

warned the taxi driver, but my sailor friend was not impressed.

"Mister!" he retorted, "when a man sells you in advance a line of goods, chances are he just ain't got 'em. He's just talking big. We'll be a-comin' back to git yer!" he added. I nodded, feeling like a Deputy Sheriff from a T.V. Western, I put in my two cents worth, "Reckon we'd better mosey along, pardner!"

Nor did my friend find this funny.

"Yep," he said.

Eight

THE sailor opened the door gingerly to see if the coast was clear, while I, with my two Betsys held in readiness, watched the others and in particular Louga so near to the medical box. "Now!" said the sailor and we moved swiftly into the corridor and closed the door behind us. We took the stairs in great leaps. At the bottom of the stairs a large "Madame" with a surcharge of chins and a balcony that would have done credit to the *Carlton*, Cannes, padded out from a downstairs room.

"That will be . . ." she began, but if she expected me to pay for my thrills that morning I had other ideas. We didn't stop but, as we hurried out of the front door, I couldn't resist a malicious,

"It wasn't worth it."

The taxi had pulled away but there were still several groups of Yankee matelots lounging outside the "hotel" and my sailor-rescuer crossed rapidly to them. It took him a little time to explain the situation to them and although I still had the two guns I felt that it could be possible that Mlle. Louga and her Dead End kids *might* have even heavier cannon with which

to respond. The sailor, too, had his small pistol and some of the others produced sheath knives, and a couple of knuckle dusters. I would have preferred to have tied them and scarpered but this was now the sailor's party and I didn't want to spoil his fun.

"O.K. fellas, let's go!"

We moved speedily back to the front door and the sailor and I kicked it open. There was no short sharp burst of Sten gunfire, no hand grenades, no revolver shots. We pounded up the stairs and reached the landing. The door to the room where I had been taken was ajar. We paused while I kicked it fully open. I could see most of the room and, unless the two were flattened behind the door, under the bed, or in the tatty wardrobe, they had certainly gone. The sailor and I rammed back the door as far as it would go and entered but our birds had flown. We stampeded down the stairs and, once more, the buxom "Madame" appeared, this time cursing volubly, questions interspered between the hailstone of vituperation as to what the blankety-blank did we lousy foreigners think we were playing at?

Was the *Edouard VII* used as a headquarters for some gang? Was the business of the *Belles de la Nuit* merely a front for something really sinister? I suspected so. But to go to the police?—I doubted if I could do that until Fleur Lemmonier had come clean on what intrigue was going on.

We pushed past the "Madame" and found a back exit through the kitchen—our enemies must have skipped out as soon as we had left. A somewhat

frightened French-Chinese cook—probably from Saigon—failed (with considerable success, I thought)—to answer our quizzing. We were wasting our time. We moved back to the front door and out into the sunshine.

“Where now, buster?” one of the sailors enquired. “The S.P. or the local lock-up boys?” My friend turned to me to see what I had to say.

“Let’s skip it now,” I replied. “It was fun at the time.”

“That’s right, too!”

“Maybe you and I could take a beer, somewhere, if it’s not too early?”

“Never too early for beer,” said my young friend. He thanked the others some of whom ironically stayed on at the *Edouard VII*, perhaps in the hope that trouble would break out. I gave the sailor the .45 for a souvenir and kept the Walther.

My friend and I strolled back down to the *Nautic* where Jean Cardilis served us beer and I cleaned the blood off my face. I explained to the matelot, as briefly as I could, why I didn’t yet—at any rate—want to bring the local gendarmerie into the picture. My friend nodded.

“By the way,” he added with a grin, “just for the record, my name’s Jess. Jess Talbot.”

“Hallo Jess. I’m Trenton and thanks for coming in like that. It was beautifully timed.”

“Shucks,” he said, just like the movies, “it was nothing.”

“How did you—?” I began and he cut in with “I was with those guys—out front. I never go into any

place like that," he added, as if the idea was horrific. Jess was a nice clean American boy and I had taken a rare shine to him. He continued, "suddenly I saw you stumble out of that taxi and you shore looked bad. I figured if you was ill you might need me and I figured if you was just liquored-up they might take you for a ride—grab your bank roll or something. So I thought it wouldn't do any harm just to see if I could-a bin of some use."

"And thank God you did! I was lucky they hadn't locked the door."

"You're darn tootin'! When I eased it open I shore had a fright!" Jess said.

"Not half the fright I was gettin'!" I said laconically.

"I figure that pretty coloured gal shore was gonna carve you up nicely."

"In the darndest places, too!" I quipped. "It was lucky you were armed."

"Armed?" Jess looked blank for a moment. "Oh *that!*" he exclaimed, fishing in his back pocket for the small revolver. "This here's a water pistol," he said. "My buddies an' I have all got 'em. Lots of fun. It's a new craze on board, see?"

"What?" I gasped. "You mean you bluffed 'em with a water pistol?"

Jess grinned and nodded. "Wasn't it dandy?" he beamed.

I laughed so loudly that Jean, the patron at the *Nautic*, peered out.

"Bring this character a triple brandy, Jean," I ordered. "We're celebrating."

But Jess was once more horrified. "No siree! No thanks, Mister Trenton, I never touch spirits, nothing but beer and root beer when I kin get it."

I looked searchingly and with a certain admiration at the fresh-looking young punk and then I remembered how I had rescued him from the hostile crowd when he had been accused of stealing. Somehow stealing didn't quite blend in with the rest of his character. Jess, as if he had read my thoughts, said:

"About that 'photo. I'd like to tell you about it, Mister Trenton."

"You don't have to, Jess," I said. I took a sip of my beer.

"I'd—I'd like to," Jess replied with some hesitancy.

"O.K. if you feel you must."

"Well—it's—it's—promise you won't laugh?" he asked.

"I've never thought stealing a laughing matter, Jess." I replied, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Dam' right," he agreed. For Dutch courage he sank the rest of his beer and then quickly plunged into his explanation.

"I guess you *will* laugh, but it's got to be told. I'll be glad to tell, maybe you'll explain to the guy I took it from, one day."

I nodded. "O.K. Go ahead, sailor," I said.

"You see," Jess continued, "I ain't never had a gal. As a kid I was brought up powerful strict by my folk—"

"It makes a change," I interrupted.

"—so, somehow that, and me being kinda shy—an'—well, all the guys on board have photos of their dames or girls they are gonna marry and I got tired of being kidded all the time about bein' a virgin and all that crap, that finally I told them about my gal Fifi."

"*Fifi?*"

"Yeah. It was just a gag. Sum'p'n I'd made up to keep the guys from bothering me. It was jest a gag, see?" Jess explained. I nodded.

"Well, the guys let me alone when they knew I'd got a girl but when we got to Villefranche an' all the time they keep askin' about my gal, and what's she like this Fifi, and when am I gonna see her, and maybe introduce her to them, and finally they get to disbelievin' me and making me mad again and so finally I get's this idea to get me a 'photo from somewhere. But these postal cards ain't no good, 'cos everyone can buy 'em, and they'd have found out, see?—so I needed a real photo." Jess paused for breath.

"So you saw the perfect photo—a genuine portrait of a French girl in the back parlour of the shop?" I surmised, filling in the gap in his narrative.

"Yeah. I pretended I wanted sum'p'n from the top shelf, then, when the little guy climbed up on a chair to get it for me, I slipped into the parlour and I grabbed me that photo of Fifi."

"I see." It was so bizarre I didn't know whether to laugh at Jess or cry a little. I said:

"Then he turned and saw you?"

"No. Another customer came in and saw me and then

they started cuttin' up rough and hustled me out to git the S.P. and—well—at that time—”

“Up I came.”

“Yep.” Jess grinned. “So now,” he added shyly, “I guess we’re even!”

Nine

WE finished our beers and I paid Jean. I said to Jean, an old friend of mine, "Look Jean, if ever Mister Jess Talbot and his friends come into the *Nautic*, his drinks are on me."

"O.K. M'sieur Trenton." Jean replied.

"Aw, shucks, I—" the young American sailor began to protest. But I cut him short.

"A pleasure. It's the least I can do. And now I've got mesome work to do." We stood up and we shook hands.

"Not good-bye, Jess," I said, "we'll meet again."

"We shore will, Mister Trenton. You kin reach me on the old *Newport News*."

"*Newport News*? An odd name for a battle waggon."

"Cruiser, sir."

"Even for a cruiser," I said.

"You won't remember my service number, but I'm a telegraphist."

"I'd noticed you were—what was called a Bunting Tosser—in my time. Now they're Tactical Communications Operators—at any rate in the Royal Navy. I guess I'm old fashioned, I prefer Bunt's."

Jess smiled warmly, and nodded in agreement.

"I guess tradition's a mighty fine thing, Mister Trenton."

This time I nodded.

"What was you in, sir?" Jess asked.

"Fleet Air Arm," I imparted.

"Gee—that would've bin for me but I've no head for heights. I shore envy you!"

"The submariner envies the bird man, the bird man the submariner, and the tank wallah wouldn't go in either for all the tea in Boston harbour, and so it goes round. But there's one thing I'm certain of Jess—"

"What's that, Mister Trenton?"

"Call me Garway, will you, and stop being so formal?" I requested with a smile. "One thing's certain," I re-averred, "you never get the same companionship ever again in this life. You get ribbed, now and then, Jess, but you'll miss them when you put on your bowler hat."

The idea of wearing a bowler hat made Jess roar. "Kin you imagine me in a derby hat?"

"A figure of speech, Jess," I said ruefully, "I meant life on the beach—being a civvy again."

Jess still continued to chuckle and shake his head.

"I remember once, on the *Indom*," I recalled, "when one of the lads was killed, his messmates had an auction sale of all his gear—it's a Navy custom. The proceeds went to his wife. A rubber band went for seven pounds. His mouth organ for eighteen. A piece of string raised six pounds ten. When things like that happen you suddenly believe in civilisation and dignity and the things your and our Thomas Paine believed in, Jess."

I swallowed a little and quickly stepped off my soap box before Jess got bored. But he was looking at me with his head cocked on one side, listening intently and not too bored with my peroration. He merely nodded.

"Well, Jess—"

We shook hands once more.

"I hope you find your Fifi."

The young sailor blushed. "Me, too," he said.

* * * *

We parted and I lit a Lucky and limped rather than strolled along the Villefranche quayside as far as the Hirondelle, to take stock. If I was going to be attacked again, I figured that it wouldn't be mid-morning on that busy waterfront but, even so, I was very apprehensive. I looked seawards and searched for the yacht with the Belgian flag. It was still at anchor outside the harbour. She looked as if she had been an R.N. motor launch—one of the bigger jobs that had been offered for sale to civilians after the war. They—whoever they were—had done a nice conversion job. There was no sign of activity on her deck. I wondered if it had anything to do with the strange case of Fleur Lemonier. As I smoked, inhaling despite all I had read, for the sole pleasure of inhaling, I went over quickly in my mind the facts.

I am driving along past St. Maxime, I said to myself, minding my own business, in the words of the late but ever-loved Damon Runyon, when a pretty girl on the hitch-hike stops me. And when I say pretty, I mean pretty. She has two suitcases and she wants to

get to Villefranche. It is on my way as I am joining a party of chums at Ventimiglia in Italy, among whom is our charmer by the name of Charity Stockton, who despite her breeding, works in the soda counter at *Fontenhams*, the élite Bond Street store—I need hardly add she is a member of that new class in England the upper class poor.

I drive my new friend to Villefranche and it is clear that (a) she is very worried and (b) the bloke she is going to meet there *hasn't* shown up or *has* shown up but has now scarpered.

Being—(and I thank God for it for, in this changing world, we appear to be a fast-diminishing group)—strictly male and appreciating the female of the species, I find myself attracted to this one who seems to have been a very special production job and I decide to dine her while she awaits her man. Some of this, I tell myself, is pure surmise on my part. On this occasion I have to confess that my fatal fascination appears to be on the blink; Fleur Lemmonier, the lady in the case, doesn't seem to think me as terrific as does old man Narcissus. I go on my way *unrejoicing* but I am awakened in the middle of the night by afore-mentioned lady banging on my door not alas! for the nocturnal pleasure of my company but for me to drive her out of Villefranche as fast as we can *git*.

We git.

En route to the Italian border we are chased and fired upon, but by the Grace of God and my sister's season ticket, we give our pursuers the slip but cannot cross into Italy as we are without our passports.

I leave the lady in a cosy hide-out and I go back for my goods and chattels, find my room has been ransacked but my passport is safe. I cross to Fleur Lemmonier's hotel to find that it appears as if her room there had not been touched. But her suitcases had gone.

Upon leaving the hotel I am hi-jacked and taken to a *bordello* where a sexy Senegalese called Louga is about to torture me to tell where Fleur is hidden when I am rescued by a young American sailor, Jess Talbot, whom I had previously befriended. Fair enough."

Now, I thought Point No. One, who was it Fleur Lemmonier was waiting to see at Villefranche? And why? Had she information or something for Mister X in her suitcases? Obviously the cases had been stolen or 'acquired' by the hotel.

Point Number Two seemed to me to be pretty obviously what happened when Fleur woke me up in the middle of the night to tell me to get her out of Villefranche fast? Had she met Mr. X? It seemed unlikely; she was far too anxious to do so to have expected a rebuff. Though, it was possible that whatever she had for him wasn't to his liking.

I finished my cigarette near the Hironnelle and sat on the rocks still in contemplative mood. Of course, there was the possibility that Fleur wasn't taking anything to Mr. X but that Mr. X had given something to her. This seemed a pretty good line of thought because whatever the Mac Guffin—the Unknown Thing was—Fleur's enemies wanted it. Wanted it or her? Well, the suitcases, if they contained anything, had been stolen it was true. But, suppose this Unknown

Thing was, say, a piece of paper, say an atom bomb secret, for the sake of argument, there was nothing to prevent Fleur from extracting it from the suitcase and having it on her person when she rushed to the *Bel Tour* for me to rush her across the border.

My musing was stopped by the fact that there was now some activity on the motor launch I had observed the previous night. A crew of two had appeared and were making preparations for her departure. I had absolutely no reason to suspect this boat had any connection with the mystery except that she had arrived about the time Fleur was expecting to meet someone by boat about the time that particular vessel entered the roads outside the little harbour.

As I watched the preparation for departure of the launch, I wished I had binoculars with me. Without them it was sometime after the launching of a little row-boat on my blind side of the craft, that I saw it speeding away from the motor launch and heading in my direction. I blinked in surprise. Here was a twist I hadn't reckoned on. It hadn't occurred to me that I was being observed *from the launch!*

* * * *

Now I was in a quandary. Did I wait to be recaptured? Should I go while the going was good? Or should I meet these blokes and have a real show-down? What sort of chance would I stand if they grabbed me again? I doubted very much if any of the people taking their aperitifs at the *Hirondelle* would come to my rescue (I was figuring that they'd want me alive in order

to pursue their enquiry as to the whereabouts of Fleur). If these were brainy boyos they might kidnap me in the form of a jest, some spirited horseplay of the Ha! Ha! Ha! variety.

I decided to compromise. I would wait until I could distinguish the crew to see if they were any of the Nasties I had already encountered and then, relying on a good wind and long legs, I would lam out fast, up the hill and into the labyrinths of the old walled town.

Now, as I waited, I could see that the row-boat had, in fact, a small outboard motor and that therefore it was coming in fast and that there were three men in the boat. Suddenly it occurred to me I was forgetting one obvious thing and that was that the people on the boat were not interested in me at all, but were merely coming into the Hironnelle to take on provisions. I laughed out loud at my folly.

The boat approached and I was able to discern the three men more clearly. They made for the small sandy strip of beach below the rocks where I was sitting. It was the obvious place to land if one was going to the Hironnelle. •

There was one thing I hadn't reckoned on, and that was that these men would attempt to fells me before they grappled with me. I was pretty startled when I saw to my horror that as the boat beached one of the men raised his hand in which he held a snub-nosed revolver and promptly fired in my direction. It pinged off a nearby rock, ricocheted and smashed a window in the restaurant behind me. I don't know if the intention was to frighten, wing or kill me. There was an

uproar and great confusion at the Hirondelle. Revolver shots were still a novelty. I was close enough to realize I had not met these three men before, and I also realized that I really didn't want to know them any more intimately. Discretion being the better part of valour I was so discreet I ran like a Herb Elliott as fast as I could up the hill. Nor did I stop until I had reached the top. The kick in the small of the back and my throbbing head didn't help. By then I was as winded as Dick Turpin's horse on the famous ride to York. There were never any taxis at the top of the Moya Corniche and at Villefranche people were getting dam' choosy about giving lifts. Time, to coin a phrase, being fleeting, I daren't risk standing on the pavement to wait for one. I thought, as I panted for breath, if this were a movie, a convenient 'bus would now pelt up from the direction of Nice and I would leap on it just as my pursuers came to the top of the hill. Alas! This was no cinematic cavorting. I looked round like some poor tiger with a tightening cobra round my belly. I was trapped, windless in Gaza, unless I did something quickly. It was then that I saw a Vespa parked by the kerb. I leapt on it, kicked it to a speedy start and I was away with frantic shouts from the owner who emerged from a shop as I disappeared towards the Italian border once more.

The whine of a too-near bullet, a near-miss of a shot, sped me on my way. These men certainly were dangerous and would stop at nothing. It was too bad of them. I was getting to dislike them intensely. To put it mildly.

Ten

I RODE like a modern Jehu on my borrowed Vespa. And as I rode back to Rocquebrune I thought, with a grimace, that I hadn't achieved a thing except I had acquired one revolver and my own passport, and I had paid Fleur's bill—but I hadn't got hold of her luggage and so she was still without her passport. This meant we couldn't cross the border into Italy—or anywhere else for that matter. Furthermore I had been tailed and shot at and there was every chance that nasty Merc might catch up with me long before I reached Fleur Lemmonier. I knew the next step in this gay fandango—when I reached Rocquebrune Fleur would have gone again. There would be a note for me at the Hotel *Cap Martin* saying "Sorry. Will Explain Everything Sometime. Lemmonier." Or "Message at the *Negrésco*, Nice. Fleur."

I deliberately left the Aston at the *Calanque d'or* and drove on the Vespa to within a short distance of the Hotel *Cap Martin* and left it. I hoped I hadn't inconvenienced the owner too much by borrowing it, but you will admit I had urgent need of it? There seemed no

sign of my pursuers and I didn't think I had been tailed, though I was probably being followed all right, all right.

I walked right speedily to the Hotel *Cap Martin* and strolled in, nodded briefly to the clerk and went up to the room I had engaged for Fleur. I thought 'here we go again, another door! Oh well, remember the old college motto, if it's a haggis shoot it instantly!' I was certainly pleased that I'd acquired the nice piece of cutlery, the 7.65 Walther.

With no *sang froid* whatsoever, I gave the agreed signal on the door and for a brief moment thought how sinful I'd been in my fairly short life and how sorry I was now. I could tell what had happened, the skulduggery merchants had copped Fleur and forced her away, when the door opened . . . in the few seconds I waited my imagination did the most fantastic cartwheels, jet propelled butterflies cavorted in the empty space of my *estomac* and I guessed I was a gone-guy. Would it be Louga and company who had flown along by helicopter? Or the sinister gentlemen with the permanent five o'clock shadow who banged off at us from the Merc?

It seemed an eternity before the key was turned in the lock and finally the door inched open. I thought speed and surprise should be the elements of attack and I flung the door back and, the Walther at the ready leapt like some demented Captain Courageous into the room. Fleur emitted a Bunter-like Yay-roo! and flopped on to the floor behind the door. I glared round ferociously, feigning an icy-calm that was pure façade.

"You blooded fool!" Fleur yelled. "You've broken my ankle."

I hadn't, but I certainly felt a nitwit. Fleur was proper chokka.

"What's the big idea?" she shouted, rubbing that oh-so-neat ankle.

"Sorry, dar-leeng. Somehow I didn't expect to find you here," I explained.

"Who? Your sweetie, from Alassio, the 'Mees' Charitable Stockpot on Tees, then?"

"Her name," I corrected Fleur, as I massaged her ankle, with as much dignity as I could muster "is Charity Stockton."

"I don't care if her name is Clap-ham Junction under Lymington," Fleur retorted.

"You sound as if you made a very quick tour trip round Britain in a French touring revue," I retorted.

"It so happens," Fleur replied, it being her turn to climb on a particularly high horse, "geography was one of my better subjects at the Sorbonne."

"No comment," I said.

"Well, where are *mes valises*?"

I looked glum and confessed. I told Fleur the whole story. Instead of going mad, she nodded and looked as if she needed cuddling. I put an arm round her.

"Look, Lemmonier, this M.L. flying the Belgian flag, these monkeys who tried to torture me, you on the run— isn't it now time to tell me the full story?"

Fleur hesitated. I believe she was about to impart all when a quiet voice at the door said.

"Excuse me, Monsieur Trenton?"

I spun round. It was lucky I didn't pull the trigger of the Walther for a strong French policeman stood there. I'd have looked a proper Charley whanging off at a gendarme. . . . behind our visitor were two plain-clothes men.

"You are Monsieur Trenton?"

I nodded.

"It's a little matter of a motor scooter, isn't it?" I said in a tone that attempted jocularity. "A schoolboy escapade, you understand?"

The policeman nodded, sighing as he did so, as if to say I'd been a naughty boy and that I'd probably be expelled from Pop.

"Your pistol permit, please?" he requested. That was a swift one, and it nigh on took my middle stump. I thought very quickly.

"Back at Cap Ferrat, Mr. Maugham's villa," I blustered. The policeman indicated to one of the plain-clothes boys to relieve me of the cannon. I gave it up with as much indifference as I could lay my hands on at the time and that was infinitesimal. I was sorry to lose that comforting old equaliser.

The other detective came swiftly forward and searched me. There was an old fashioned expression "I didn't know where to put my face," and I could have used it when the detective fished out my mascot, Ginsberg the golliwog. I looked at Fleur and said lamely, "Arrested development."

"We must get you psycho-analysed sometime," Fleur suggested.

"When I come out, say in about fifteen years time? They'll call me the Clot of Monte Carlo."

"That could be," Fleur averred.

"Your passport, please." The little gendarme was icily correct.

I grinned triumphantly and winked at Fleur. I'd floored them this time. What a lucky break the Dead End Kids hadn't located that, when they searched my room at Villefranche. I handed my passport over and looked smugly at Fleur. Her pretty face was registering surprise as she looked at the policeman, looking at my passport. I turned and looked at him, too. He seemed pretty narked.

"This is your passport?"

"Of course."

He handed it back to me. The outside number was certainly my number. I flipped it open. A fat gentleman's photo, a face that was generous with chins but hirsutely had nothing, grinned up at me. It was as much like me as chalk to a Tilsiter. I gasped in perplexity.

"But. I——" I yammered, looking at the front of the passport once more. "This passport's not mine——"

"I can see that, Monsieur." The policeman said as if his voice had been in a deep-freeze for years. "And, when I have seen your own passport, perhaps you will tell me how you happen to have this *other* British subject's passport?"

"Now look here officer——" I began belligerently, but the cop wasn't fooled.

"Your passport, please."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You got me, pal!" I said in a pseudo-American accent.

The policeman turned to Fleur.

"Your name please?"

"Fleur Lemmonier."

"Your papers?"

"They are at Villefranche—at the *Nightingale*." Fleur said.

The policeman had a short conference with his two plain clothes colleagues, then he turned to us.

"You will come with us, please."

I looked at Fleur who turned and looked pointedly at my mascot.

"Tell me, Trenton," she said pointedly. "Is he for good luck—or for bad?"

Neither Ginsberg or I deigned to answer.

We were escorted downstairs past a bewildered reception clerk and one or two holidaymakers in gay clothes. A police car was at the pavement. We sat in the back with one of the plainclothes men on either side of us. It was a tough squeeze but not unpleasant for Schiaparelli's *Si* on Fleur made up for the occasional blast of garlic that hit me from the blow-torch breath of the dick on my side. The gendarme sat in front with the driver. The receptionist hurried out, waving the bill.

"Don't worry," I called out. "You can send it on?"

"But where to, Monsieur?"

"Devil's Island, I expect," I told him. The joke went as flat as the Westminster School pancake.

We drove in silence back towards Villefranche. But

when we reached it, we swung up right instead of going left and it wasn't till then that I realized we had been fooled.

"Hey Ho!" I said with a laugh as gay and artificial as a rocking horse. "I smell a rat—or maybe four of them."

Fleur clutched my arm. "Oh no!" She said fearfully.

"Oh yes," I replied.

Eleven

FLEUR turned on our captors. "Now that I look at you again I wonder how I could possibly have thought such muck were police!" she said contemptuously in French. It didn't bother them any. As we swept up the mountain I thought 'these boyos haven't bothered to blindfold us; it means either the hide-out is a temporary one, or they *didn't intend that we should pass that way again!*' I decided to keep this gay thought to myself.

Suddenly the car turned sharply to the right into the entrance to a large villa with the ironic name of *Le Paradis*, and stopped at the gates. There was a small lodge by the side of the drive and a character who could have been a Senegalese hurried out, scrutinized the car carefully, and then opened the gates to let us drive through. He made no effort to conceal a revolver which he had strapped to his belt.

As we drove up the drive I heard the gates clang behind us and there was an ominous doom-like finality about their closing. I tried hard to think of something to cheer up Fleur.

"It seemed fun at the time," I quipped.

"What did?" Fleur asked.

"Picking you up—you, your bikini, and your two suitcases."

The "gents" with us pricked up their ears. Fleur noticed it, too. We exchanged glances.

"You know, there's an avid interest in your valises, Mlle. Lemmonier," I said.

"What's this word 'avid'?" Fleur enquired, obviously stalling.

"Not to worry-mints," I continued. "We ain't dead yet," I gagged.

"Not quite but when you are it's for a long time," Fleur retorted. I winced. Still our guards said nothing. We reached the imposing front of the villa. It had a noble façade, but I wondered about the interior.

As soon as the car stopped our captors acted fast. We were hustled unceremoniously out of it and quickly rushed into the house. Another man, in a beret and an old blue shirt and faded jeans, nodded as we went by. He, too, had a nice line in revolvers, his, a Smith and Wesson .32, was held in his hand. It seemed as if they had raided an American Forces store! I hoped Fleur hadn't realized just how many "bods" were involved in this racket—it was practically a private army and, whatever it was, it was strictly Big Time: and that's what I hoped they'd all eventually get! We were rushed across the hall to a door at the far end of the wide hall. The "gendarme" knocked on the door and, without waiting for a reply, opened it and we were thrust inside.

The room was an imposing study, well-appointed,

with a fine library, nondescript but not inexpensive oil paintings, thick, good-class curtains and heavy brocade furniture, including a large sofa and matching chairs. On the sofa, torn to shreds, were the contents of Fleur's two suitcases and, indeed, the cases themselves were there, or what remained of them, for these, too, had been thoroughly ripped. At the far end of the room, with large French windows leading to the garden behind, there was a magnificent walnut desk, with heavily carved legs. A fine silver ink stand and all the usual paraphernalia was on the desk. Also a Behind that had sat a similar way when I was last quizzed.

"Hallo, Louga! Always a pleasure!" I said jocularly, though I didn't feel a bit jocular. I hoped the tremor in my voice had gone unnoticed. Louga smiled, showing off those beautiful teeth. She toyed with an ornate paper knife. All her old composure, the dazzling sexy façade was once more to the fore.

"Won't you introduce me to your girl friend?" Louga enquired silkily.

"Why, Louga, I thought *you* were my girl friend," I said.

"Not yet." Louga replied imperturbably.

"This is Mlle. Fleur Lem—"

"Don't be silly, Garway," Fleur cut in, "of course we have met. Louga is just being \ musing." I could tell without looking at her that Fleur was very frightened.

"You know Louga, I'd love to see you in a dress one day, that throat brooch would look much better on a dress. Yes, I'd say you would look very feminine, very feminine indeed."

Louga was human enough to be flattered.

"Don't you like me in trousers?" she purred.

"Very much. Very much indeed. But you should learn to do all the buttons up—or is that deliberate?" I said, knowing that she was immaculate. She fell for it and glanced down quickly.

"Never mind the funny talk!" someone said in a harsh voice. "You wait till you're spoken to."

From one of the large chairs, a man, short with a shock of raven black curly hair, short but with very wide shoulders and the appearance of great strength, got to his feet. He had a large hooked nose which stood out like a great beak from his face, and you felt he could almost use the nose as a hook. His eyes were very small, very bright, and he had the look of great intelligence but also of great craftiness. I instantly disliked him. His face was heavily lined and yet he could not have been more than about thirty-four and I speculated as I summed him up, if he dyed his hair. He wore an Italian suit, one of those nasty little cut-away coats with the too-short body and the three buttons and the wide shoulders—a ludicrous choice for a squat man but he was a bit of a dandy for his breast pocket had a white handkerchief therein, worn square-on, in the new way they were all worn these days, and in his black knitted tie there gleamed a too-large pearl. One felt here was a powerful ox of a little man, with long, gorilla-like arms that probably had the boff of a bull; and then with this, one felt he had the cunning of a lynx and an utter unscrupulousness that would take some beating. He positively exuded evil power. He moved

slowly from the chair to the desk and I noticed that Louga had moved from her sitting position to a standing one.

"Well, Miss Lemmonier, you're leading us quite a little dance, aren't you?" he said. There was a pretence of amused tolerance in his question but even on so short an acquaintance I could tell that this was as phoney as chop suey was Chinese. I half inclined my head to see how Fleur was reacting and I was startled to see that she was still very frightened. Though her voice was composed I could tell that this man terrified her. I wondered why. I glanced round to see what our chances were in the event of a sudden dash for freedom. We had been placed in front of the desk with the two "detectives" on either side of us and the "gendarme" at the door. Now that we were in the house none of the men had their revolvers at the ready, though it wouldn't take the "gendarme" long to whip his out of its conveniently slung holster. Added to our worries the French windows were closed. Then, as if answering my unsaid prayer, the man crossed to the windows and opened them.

"It's going to get quite hot in here, isn't it, Louga?" he said, then, as if sensing my thoughts, he added, "don't worry, we don't need a gramophone to hide any—er—noise. We are a long way from anyone here," he said pointedly. He pressed a desk button, and, while awaiting a reply to it, he took a cigarette from a large silver box on the table and put it in his mouth. If I expected one of the henchmen to leap forward with a light, like a Hollywood gangster film, I was mistaken.

Nothing happened. Nor did he light the cigarette. He merely held it in his mouth as if the whole thing was a deliberate anti-climax and one was forever waiting for him to go ahead and light the dam' thing! The suspense of this move was surprising.

There was a brief tap on the door and two men entered. I was not surprised to see that one was the phoney taxi man and the other my old friend the Fanatic with the five o'clock shadow and the crew-cut.

"Aha! The Dead End kids!" I quipped.

The Boss was not amused.

"You keep your dam' mouth shut," he said. He looked at me penetratingly for some seconds then he crossed to me. "My name—to you anyway, is Mister Guardelli. We haven't been introduced yet, have we?" he said. He stood glowering at me, his beady little eyes boring like gimlets into me. I felt he could have hooked out one of my eyes with his projecting proboscis.

"O.K. Guardelli! What's on your tiny mind?" I enquired, I hoped coolly.

He breathed up at me and I stepped back slightly.

He misunderstood this.

"What's the matter? Are you perhaps a little afraid of me?" he asked me with a tranquillity that didn't fool me. Was he Italian born? The accent seemed Italian. Guardelli? It was probably a *nom-de-guerre*. I explained. "Sorry, chum. It's your garlic. It's like a blow-torch. Fair 'orrid, if you perceive my drift, Guardelli, old fruit, old sock."

This appeared to anger him.

"Mister Guardelli," he corrected me, adding, "I

think perhaps you would like my visiting card?"

"Very much," I said politely. Then, as I replied, he made one mistake, he shifted his weight and as he swung a neat left hook to my jaw, I parried it with my right and I shot a quick left jab to his solar plexus. He grunted and dropped to the ground. The cigarette dropped on to the Aubusson.

"Naughty-naughty!" I clucked as the henchmen ran to his rescue. He sat gasping on the deck and he was plenty, plenty angry.

"That was a foul blow," he lied. "A dirty blow!"

Meanwhile his stooges had helped him to his feet and I had gone down under a hail of blows from the others, including a further kick in the small of the back that had me gasping too.

"Pick him up!" snarled the Boss, still suffering from my neat one that had been utterly Queensberry. The boyos did so.

"Please Boss, let me have him!" requested the Fanatic. "Please. I owe him a little debt, M'sieur Guardelli."

All this time Louga had stood watching with a faint smile on her face—but she had not been watching me or my pugilistic cavortings with her Boss, but she was smiling at Fleur. I glanced at Fleur who, for her part, stood like the proverbial rabbit in front of a boa constrictor.

"Now where were we?" I said, speaking with difficulty. "You were presenting me with your visiting card, I believe?" I tried to be urbane.

Mr. Guardelli was in a very nasty mood. I had made

him look an ass in front of his henchmen and he was not amused at all, at all.

"So you fight unfairly, eh? It's off with the gloves, is it? Very well, Mr.—Mr.—" He pretended to forget my name. He reached into his pocket and brought out a passport. He flipped it open.

"Fleur Angelique Madeline Lemmonier." He read out. Fleur gasped. Guardelli pretended that he had made a mistake. "Sorry! Wrong one!" he said. He drew another passport out of his pocket and opened it. "Oh yes," he said, "Mr. Trenton."

"Why you saucy basket!" I began.

"Shut your mouth, I say!" he yelled. He was shaking with fury and he had great difficulty controlling himself. Then he saw his cigarette on the carpet. "Pick that up!" he commanded.

"Like hell!" I retorted. There was a pregnable pause.

"Antonio, you can deal with him later. We are wasting time," Louga suddenly counselled. It seemed to control Mr. Guardelli. He nodded.

"You are right, Louga." Guardelli turned to Fleur.

"Now, Mlle. Lemmonier. Before I completely lose my patience. Let me have it, please."

"Let you have what?" Fleur stalled.

The little man's jaw tightened. He said "I'll give you one more chance."

Twelve

THE silence was so penetrating I thought I'd liven things up. "It's so quiet you could hear an H-bomb drop."

"You think you're so funny Trenton, we'll see in a minute if you are still laughing," Guardelli snarled.

But I had at least given Fleur a little help. For a moment or two, she looked less like a frightened rabbit. I winked at her.

"This thing of yours seems to be very important to these charmers," I remarked, then turned to Guardelli.

"What guarantee has Mlle. Lemmonier she'll be untouched if she gives you whatever it is you are after?"

If I thought I was successfully doing the happy mediator act I was soon to be disillusioned.

"I'm sorry Garway, you must keep out of this," Fleur said quickly.

"O.K." I retorted. "But I had a few seconds with this lot, and they don't play with lollipops."

For the first time Antonio Guardelli looked at me with a less jaundiced eye.

"You speak the truth, Trenton. You speak the truth."

"Yes, Guardelli, I do. Why I remember once at Eton

someone swiped a fellow's strawberry mess at Rowlands and I instantly owned up. Afterwards they always called me George. You know, George Washington Garway Trenton. This, of course, was the year the Oppidans and the Collegers cooled in their first bully and then the Oppidans furked and they eventually reached good calk—"

"You can quite stalling and shut your mouth," suddenly Louga said quietly.

"My! My! What big eyes you've got, Louga! As my old granny used to say, 'I could eat you without any pepper or salt, my little dear.' Though, come to think of it—"

But, by now, Guardelli had tired of my interruptions. He snapped out some command in what may have been Patois and I was promptly seized by the Fanatic and the Gendarme and held while one of the plain clothes men tied a handkerchief across my mouth. They were about to blindfold me too when Guardelli stopped them. It was clear that in his benevolent way he didn't want me to miss any of the fireworks.

"All right, Lemmonier," he said. "Do we get it?"

Fleur was silent, and once more the quiet was very nasty indeed. It seemed to me that Fleur hadn't realized the full repercussions of her refusal to impart.

"I give you ten more seconds only," Guardelli said.

"I haven't got it," Fleur started falteringly.

Guardelli laughed softly a dirty, gurgling chuckle, but there was no smile in his mean little eyes.

"We think you have and in a moment we will have it, or, at any rate, know where you've hidden it."

"I tell you I haven't got it," Fleur re-averred. She was clearly very, very scared in spite of her attempted *savoir-faire*. Thinking back at the way she had got me to rush her out of Villefranche earlier on, I thought she was being surprisingly silly not to give way to this gang of trash.

"One last chance. I—" but Guardelli stopped what he was saying and then smiled, displaying a number of gold teeth which gave his determined mouth a false gaiety. He reflected for a moment, then.

"Axel!" he called out to the fanatic, "perhaps our guests would like to meet Toby."

The Fanatic One smiled back, his stumpy black teeth and the gaps where there weren't any, contrasted with the affluent dental work in his Boss's mouth.

"Toby! Of course, Toby!" Delighted he slipped out to get whoever Toby was.

I had a feeling we wouldn't want to meet him. These were very evil *hombres* indeed and I felt how pleasant it would be right then and there to find it was all a nasty dream and soon (the sooner the better!) I would wake up at Alassio to find my head in a woman's lap and I would look up into the young, laughing face of Charity Stockton, my current honeybee—and all would be well. But, if it were a nightmare, then, too, Fleur Lemmonier would be something chimeral and evanescent and this was a pity, a great pity. Though if Fleur didn't stop being silly, Fleur *would* surely be chimeral and evanescent, for I trusted these laddies about as far as I could throw them and I was no caber-tosser.

The door opened and all eyes were on it. I was just

about to try something spectacular when, to my surprise, the Fanatic returned alone. Had Toby, whoever Toby was, scarpered, made the proverbial moonlight flit? But once inside, the Fanatic dropped his eyes to a lower level and looked at the door below the handle.

What was this? Was poor Toby maimed by these baskets, and, therefore, had he to crawl into the room?

In a fascinated dread I waited. Then there was a funny whine and a small dog, a small mongrel black and white job with an uncut long tail jiggled into the room on his back feet. I could hear Fleur's sigh of relief which preceded mine by a second. The dog made a complete circle of the carpet, all the time on his back feet, but there was an air of great sadness about him.

"Meet Toby," Guardelli introduced us. There was something wrong about this seemingly innocent trick.

"All right, Guardelli, let's have the subtle boomerang, the twisteroo?" I suggested. Guardelli didn't catch on and had to have it explained to him.

"I smell a rat, *Mister* Guardelli and I have a slight suspicion it's you!" I continued. Oddly, this time Guardelli didn't lose his temper. He was obviously relishing the climax to his trick. He feigned surprise.

"Oh you're wondering how it's done, eh?" he said, again softly, and laughed one of his special laughs, a laugh dehydrated of gaiety. "It's very simple. Shall I tell you how I taught Toby that trick?"

Neither Fleur or I answered, whether because we were reluctant to hear or whether because I knew we didn't want to know.

"I will tell you. It's so very simple, I'm surprised

more people haven't thought of it. Can you observe the paws of his front legs?"

"No. And I don't want to. Let's talk about other things, Antonio Old Sport, eh, for instance who made those terribly pointed shoes you're wearing?—I presume they're hand-made, and that ghastly suit—"

"Shut up!" screamed the Fanatic. "Shut up, you piece of—, or I'll silence you for good!"

"Yes, do be quiet," Guardelli requested, completely suave and composed once more. He turned to Fleur. "I want to tell *you* how it's done, Mlle. Lemmonier, it will interest you very much."

"I doubt it."

"Oh yes. You see, *we burn the front paws*. It's as simple as that, Toby finds that most uncomfortable. He prefers to walk on his rear legs."

"You dirty louse!" I shouted. I made a great leap towards Guardelli but his henchmen grabbed me and we had a short scuffle during which I received a neat kick in the groin that had me gasping. When order was restored Guardelli turned to the fanatic. "Take Toby out," he ordered.

The Fanatic's way of doing this was also very simple. He gave the little dog a peremptory kick and it yelped and then swayed out on its back legs like some marionette figure manipulated by some drunk master, and teetered slowly out.

In my fury I half-sobbed, half shouted my protest at the Fanatical One's behaviour but once more I was seized before I could get to him. He closed the door on the little dog and leered sadistically at me.

"You think you're so tough, you——, you!" he cried out shrilly.

"Now that our prisoners have seen Toby, suppose we ask Lemmonier once more, is she going to give it to us?" Louga said. She appeared to control Guardelli, a sort of power behind the throne. I wondered if they were lovers.

Guardelli nodded.

"Well," he asked Fleur, "do we get it?"

But still Fleur said nothing.

Thirteen

“**I** WILL count up to five,” Guardelli said authoritatively, “and you will tell me before I reach six.”

Now Fleur Lemmonier looked round wildly like some hunted animal for whom there was no escape.

I prayed she would break down and impart the information they wanted.

Meanwhile Louga, snake-like, slipped forward with a look of relish on her sensuous lips. She still toyed with the paper knife. Guardelli continued to count slowly and suddenly Fleur pulled herself together and like some resolute Maquis awaiting despatch, stood, chin firm, but with a tremble on her lips, and said nothing.

“ . . . four, five!” Guardelli intoned without emotion. “All right. You had a fair chance, Mlle. Lemmonier,” he said. He turned to Louga.

“Louga—!”

She nodded. She crossed slowly to Fleur and now my Adam’s apple started working overtime and I could feel tiny beads of perspiration on my brow and a little trickle of sweat rivulet-like ran down the small of my back.

"Hallo Fleur!" Louga said softly. "Wouldn't you like to come and play? Louga would love to play with Fleur!" Fleur shrank back to the wall. It was once more the fear of the unknown. What did Louga mean? How "play"? What kind of "play"?

"Don't touch me," she said in a small scared voice. "Keep your hands off me . . . don't touch me!"

But Louga continued with her honeyed tone.

"Now Fleur, just a little play. Now, Fleur—"

Then, very swiftly, Louga leapt forward with a pantherlike grace and grabbed both Fleur's arms and with ease forced them behind Fleur's back so that now the two beautiful women touched one another, breast to breast, Fleur looking up in awe. Now I couldn't be sure if Fleur was fighting fear or fighting the possibility of a weakness she herself possessed, or fighting the disgust of Louga's proximity. I was utterly confused and very scared. Fleur's mouth was slightly parted and a sudden flooding up of nausea hit me as swiftly. Louga bent down and kissed Fleur full on the lips. For a moment I thought Fleur was going to faint, she went so limp in Louga's grip and I wished to hell she would. Then Louga lifted Fleur up and started to carry her, unprotestingly but shivering and with teeth chattering. She moved towards the door when Guardelli stopped her. Then he looked at me.

"Why so modest?" He said to Louga. He indicated the big walnut desk. "What's wrong with here?" he said.

"Why you big hairy ape!" I said from behind my gag but it came out all strangled. Guardelli looked across at me and smiled sinisterly.

"In future you will call me *Mister*, I think!" he said.

By now Louga had laid Fleur on the table and I decided to summon up all the strength I had to create a diversion. If I could wrench myself free, I couldn't do much but I could have a go. Then, as I looked round the room for something solid to grab, to my surprise I saw three men coming speedily up the garden towards the French windows. They moved swiftly and one held a tommy gun at the ready. Help was indeed on the way! This was as good a time as any to create the diversion. I suddenly dropped back and lugged like the devil bringing the "gendarme" into contact with the Fanatic, then as their heads clunked together, I pushed them violently outwards so that they fell in a heap, a mass of waving arms and legs.

I leapt for the nearest plain clothes man who was reaching for his revolver and I jolted back his head with—even if I say so myself and I do say so myself—one of the neatest straight lefts I had ever delivered. He just dropped as classically as I had socked him. I turned to grab a chair when the other "detective" was on me. He hadn't waited to bring out the cutlery, he just made a dive and I presented him with the legs of the chair which I jabbed at him as he rushed me. One of the legs caught him on the left cheek and ripped it. He yelled like the stuck pig he was.

"Hold it!" yelled someone and as our captors turned I quickly dropped to the desk. If they were giving out with the free sprays from the tommy I wanted no part of it. I was glad that Fleur was lying flat on the desk.

There followed a short cacophony of mixed sounds

including a yell of command from Guardelli to a confused shout from our captors and then the ominous, persuasive cough from the tommy and then once more silence.

"Lock the door!" a voice commanded and the Fanatic went and did so.

Very warily, in case the newcomers thought I was one of the other mob being bold, I got gingerly to my feet and grinned the weakest grin on record, forgetting that it was concealed by the gag in my mouth.

It was the gag that saved me. It proved I was on Fleur's side. The man with the tommy was aiming the thing at me when he saw the gag. Meanwhile, Fleur, now by his side, shouted a warning.

"Not him, he's a friend!" she called out.

All the Guardelli mob were standing well away from the French windows where the three newcomers stood, all of the Guardelli mob save for the taxi man who lay on the floor. He appeared to be very dead. There was an acrid smell emanating from the tommy and it always took me back to Service days when I smelt it and it made the old adrenalin sing round the old frame. I crossed swiftly to our rescuers.

"Thanks, in the nick of time as they say in the serials!"

"Let's go!" one of the men said. His voice was educated English and this was the first of several surprises.

"Just a tick!" I requested. I crossed to Guardelli who stood panting with the face of a befrocted tiger, if you'll forgive the mixed metaphor. I think he (and the rest of them) thought I was going to kick him in the privates.

Instead I took the two passports out of his coat pocket.

"If you don't mind," I said politely, adding with a natural glee, "Guardelli, wasn't it?"

"You bastard!" he said through clenched teeth. "I'll get you if it takes all my life; you'll call me Mister!"

"I doubt it, chum!" I retorted. "But I'll make a deal with you. I'll come and see you at the Scrubs. You know, prisoner's friend and all that."

For a reply he spat in my face. This really fazed me. I stepped forward. There was the sound of people trying to open the door.

"Oh come on, man!" said the cultivated-voiced Britisher impatiently.

"Yes. Let's scam out of here!" one of his colleagues said, in a not-so-la-di-da voice; he sounded Cockney to me.

"Listen, Beverlow, I warn you—" yelled Guardelli.

The man referred to as Beverlow rapped out his reply.

"Today I do the warning, Guardelli. You pipe down and you pack up and get out of here fast!" The noise of the door being shouldered was now pretty loud.

"Stand clear of the door!" commanded the man with the tommy. The Fanatic who was nearest it, moved very pronto out of the way. Coolly and without any emotion the bloke with the tommy gave the door frame a short, sharp squirt. The neat bullet holes patterned the wood on the door and there was silence from without.

"Let's go!"

We all made for the French windows. As I made to pass her Louga stood in my way but though I was wary about that paper knife she merely grinned.

"You know," I said, "you are a very naughty girl."

Louga looked at me but with no malice. "As men go, I quite like you, Trenton," she retorted.

It was typically Louga and I was still trying to puzzle out a reply when the Englishman said :

"Oh for God's sake man, come on!"

I tore Louga off a neat Navy salute and was instantly at the side of Fleur who stuck close to the gentleman who held the trumps—the tommy.

"Isn't there something in Shakespeare that says 'stay not upon your going but scam'?" I quipped as we speedily backed into the garden, our eyes glued to Guardelli and his miscreants while the other two men watched the garden.

"I doubt it," said the Englishman and, surprisingly, I think he was being quite serious.

Fourteen

IN the drive there was a Rolls-Royce with a driver who had the engine throbbing. We backed quickly towards it, and when we reached it our rescuer flung open the door for Fleur to tumble in but—and it was as if we had the same thought at the same moment—Fleur hesitated. I found myself looking at her and I replied to her unsaid thought, “Yes, I know!” I turned to the Britisher and said “I’ll only be a second, can I take the tommy?”

“You can’t go back!”

“I’ll only be a tick! Honest!”

“Christ!” he swore, “what now?” He seemed naturally reluctant for me to take their main means of support.

“Here, take this!” They tossed me a S. and W. .38, a really powerful piece of cutlery.

“Thanks.”

Before they could question me I was off back to the house as fast as I could go. Ignoring the French windows, I made for the front entrance and I rushed into the hall, revolver at the ready. By the door to the room in which we had been quizzed, the door peppered by

the tommy, lay a man who was very quiet indeed. By his side, head in his hands, in a prone position, groaning, was another of the thugs, his revolver by his side. Hearing my footsteps he looked up and made a grab for the gun with his left hand. I then saw he had a flesh wound in his right arm. He appeared too much like a sitting target for me to eliminate him and, indeed, I really wasn't officially "in" on this party, so I rushed him before he could take aim and swiftly kicked the revolver out of his hand. An idiotic thing to do as I was to realize in a few seconds time. Meanwhile I was quickly looking round searching for the object of my return. To my despair I could not find this and I could hear shouting from the room where Louga and company were. There was a room to the right of the hall and the door to it was open. Impulsively I rushed in, kicking the door wide, pistol at the ready. There was no one there.

"Toby! Toby!" I yelled. "Where the hell are you?"

I looked round wildly, heart pounding, wondering how long I'd got before someone drilled me. I decided to give one more shout.

"Toby!"

In reply, at last, a small canine snout peered from under a large chair. Toby gazed sadly up and suspiciously at me.

"Toby come on! It's your last chance!" I yelled encouragingly. It could be he only knew menacing tones and was realizing here was a different timbre. Suddenly he decided to chance it. With a little yelp he came out

of hiding and then, getting awkwardly on to his back legs, once more he jiggled towards me.

"Come on, you poor little basket!" I said, hurrying forward and scooping him up. Turning I made for the door, then had the sense to pause. I glanced out and noticed that the dead gent was, of course, still in the same spot as before, but the wounded character had moved. Then, as I peered round cautiously, a shot whined past my head, nicking my ear. I swung in the direction from which it had been fired to discover my assailant well concealed behind the stairs. I loosed off a couple of quick ones designed really to get him to duck and thus give me a head start. I dived for the front door, zig-zagging with Toby in my arms, relying on my erratic course and the fact that the bloke had to shoot left handed. This paid off, for when a further shot rang out, it smashed the glass panel by the side of the room door, well clear of me.

By now I was in the clear and running like the devil for the Rolls. Now a nasty sound started to my right, the quick splutter of a Sten. It was emanating from the French windows. Whoever had it was in too much of a hurry to hold it down and as he pulled the trigger, it kicked wildly up and high into the trees. As the gent behind the trigger corrected his aim, there was a quick burst from the tommy from "our" side and I reached the Rolls, threw Toby in and fell on the floor as the driver gunned the engine well before I reached the car.

We left to the accompaniment of more gunfire but escaped unscratched. We zoomed down the drive and I wondered about the sentry at the gates. I needn't have

bothered. He was there all right, but lying on his face and showing not the slightest interest in the proceedings. I raised my eyebrows: I certainly was in wild company. The Englishman looked at me in mock horror, then at Toby.

"You mean you went back for *that*?" he enquired.

This didn't require an answer. The Cockney-voiced bloke shook his head in mock horror.

"Mad, absolutely bally Bonkers!"

For reply Fleur said: "Look at his front paws, you'd have gone back, Lennie," she said.

Lennie pretended to glance indifferently at Toby as he lay panting on the floor.

"Not me, not bloody likely," he averred. We let it go.

Fleur looked at me gratefully for a moment and then said drily and, I thought, unfairly,

"For one minute I thought you were going back for Louga."

I made a grimace. "*Touché*. Can I help my manly charms?"

"I expect so!"

"What's your beef? You know I've got a gal in Kokomo, I mean Ventimiglia! And, anyway, you were saved from a Fate Worse than Death, weren't you?"

Fleur looked at me and now she wasn't kidding. "I am frightened of Guadelli but Louga terrifies me."

"I know—the penny had dropped," I replied.

"What does that mean?"

Before I could explain to Fleur, the Englishman with the public school voice, looking me up and down said:

"Who is this fellow, Fleur?"

"Sorry! I should have introduced you," Fleur replied, now as cool as the proverbial cucumber.

"Garway Trenton, this is my fiancé, Lord Edward Beverlow."

We murmured how-do-you-do's as if we were at Lords for the Eton and Harrow match.

"This is Len and that's Perce—part of his Lordship's boat crew," Fleur explained. They looked very young and very tough. They nodded curtly.

"How did *he* get into the act?" his Lordship enquired. "Is this another split?" he turned to me to enquire.

"You're talking Greek to me, Beverlow," I said, giving his title scant respect, "me with a strictly modern education, I only made Middle Remove by a gnat's eyelash."

"Trenton? That rings a bell, aren't you the writer-fellow?" Beverlow enquired. He said it as if this was a dreadful solecism.

"Yes. I'm the 'writer fellow'," I replied. He didn't follow it up, my antecedents, my background, my education and upbringing obviously were best forgotten, instead his Lordship said, pointing at Toby,

"You'll have to put that chap in quarantine, you know, if you bring him to England." It was typical of the Quality, that, with it hailing bullets, he was off on some bizarre tangent.

"You were in the Brigade, weren't you?" I replied.

His surprise at my deduction made me a positive Sherlock Holmes.

"Yes, by jove, how do you know?"

"I pass," I said. He was slight for the Guards, but I could see him with his thin, aristocratic face under a bearskin—with his aquiline nose sniffing the air on a winter's morning at St. James's Palace, his D.S.O. or M.C. on his tunic.

"Coleridge's?" I shot at him, and it wasn't so wide. He gasped involuntarily.

"Charmier's, actually. Good lord! Are you an O.E.?" he enquired. I said I had had that misfortune but I had subsequently, on leaving Balliol, acquired a little education at the *Four Hundred* and in the Fleet Air Arm. His Lordship began to thaw rapidly. Then, out of the blue, Fleur Lemmonier, out of the conversation too long for any woman, had to interrupt with:

"It could be I might want to keep him."

His Lordship looked startled.

"Who—Trenton?"

Fleur giggled. "I meant Toby the dog," she explained. "If I do I shall call him Youki."

"You jolly well won't!" I told her.

"Why not?"

"Because all French dogs are called Youki, even Leontine Sagan's."

"No they're not. A lot are called Dick."

"Anyway, his name is Toby," I said.

His Lordship looked back to see if we were being pursued and when we weren't, he turned to Fleur again.

"O.K. Fleur Old Girl, let's have it," he said.

"Don't call me Old Girl," Fleur retorted angrily.

"All right, Old Girl, keep your wool on."

"Never mind about my wool. Where are we going?"

"Back to the yacht."

A sudden suspicion shook me.

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "You're the chaps that whanged off at me in Villefranche!"

His Lordship looked quite sheepish.

"Yes. Pure error. Wrong gear, old boy, terribly sorry and all that."

"Well I'm blowed," interrupted the Cockney, "that's bloody funny! So it *was* you?"

"I should jolly well say so."

"What happened?" Fleur enquired.

"I didn't bother to tell you," I began by way of explanation when Beverlow cut in:

"My boys took a pot shot at your chum," he explained to Fleur, "you see, we'd seen you drive off with him and we figured you'd been kidnapped. When he came back without you we thought we'd grab him."

"Ta ever so!" I quipped tartly.

"Force him to bargain, as it were," Beverlow said.

"Oh Neddy, you really are the biggest idiot!" Fleur told him succinctly.

"Thanks awfully, Old Girl!" Neddy retorted, getting his own back.

"Suppose one of you lets me in on the secret. What is it you are all after?" I enquired. The Cockney called Len jumped in with a:

"Careful, Neddy. He could be an Inter-pol type!" he cautioned. This made me laugh.

"Time was!" I said.

Neddy Beverlow turned his aristocratic face towards Fleur.

"O.K. honey"—and the affectionate term sounded so strange from his so-English voice, "let's have it."

"Here we go again!" Fleur said.

"What do you mean?" Neddy asked, getting a trifle narked. "What have you done with it?"

"I keep telling everyone, *I haven't got it.*"

"Who has then?" his Lordship enquired, obviously very suspicious.

"Nash Tufton." Fleur said, "the Australian."

Fifteen

“NASH TUFTON?” Perce, who had a Lancashire accent, nigh on exploded.

The Lord Beverlow looked at Fleur in blank astonishment. “Nash Tufton?” he repeated. “Well I’m damned!” he murmured. As he said it, his attitude to Fleur seemed to change; he glared at her with a mixture of hostility and incredulity. “You mean to say that all this time—” he began to expostulate but Fleur cut in angrily.

“Thanks very much!” she shouted. “Thank you for being so considerate!”

“What do you mean, didn’t I—?”

“Yes. Yes indeed you rescued me—and, now that you realize I haven’t got it, I suppose you plan to drive me back to St. Maxime’s.”

“Really Fleur!” his Lordship protested. Fleur’s distaste shook him, she grabbed at the engagement ring on her left finger and, with an effort, managed to get it off.

“Here!” she said. “You had better have this back! And thank you for nothing!” she added. She handed Neddy Beverlow the beautiful ring adding, in a manner

that can only be described as positively feminine, "I never cared for emeralds, anyway!"

His Lordship was baffled.

"But I understood you to say—" he began lamely but once more Fleur shot him down in flames.

"'You understand'," she mimicked. "You have understood nothing. You are so eager to rescue your fiancée only for your own gain. Well, you've gained nothing. In truth, you have lost two things—it and me!"

His Lordship looked as if he might sink through the floorboards of his elegant Rolls. Though I admit that I was pleased at his rebuff, after all, I felt that, though I had no claim to have mandated the territory that was Fleur Lemmonier, nevertheless I sort of hoped I might—again to mix my metaphors—have the inside track with this delectable girl, I was sorry for him. By way of consolation I winked at him. He didn't seem to see it as a token of my sympathy, rather the reverse, he positively glared at me, seeing me for the villain I so clearly was.

"How do *you* come into all this?" he challenged me aggressively.

"Well, citizen," I began, "it was this way. I was driving along the coast en route to a villa near that not-so-gay place Ventimiglia—"

"To join *his fiancée*," Fleur butted in and pointedly prevaricated, rather unnecessarily overdoing it, I thought.

"When Fleur, that is," I altered it hastily, "Mlle. Lemmonier asked me for a lift—"

"What happened to the Renault?" his Lordship enquired. It was all like a jigsaw puzzle and every now and then, tantalizingly they pushed a little piece my way and I popped it into place in the very uncompleted pattern. I rather enjoyed this.

"The Renault he would not march!" Fleur spluttered and in her anger her English became less good and even more charming: at any rate, to me.

"Didn't you try and get help?" Neddy Beverlow asked aggressively.

"Of course I did. Oh it's no good talking to you, you're quite impossible. M'sieur Trenton here was kind enough to come to my rescue."

"Galahad's my middle name," I gagged. But his Lordship took this quite seriously.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "So's mine." The seeming coincidence mollifying him no little. I decided to let it go. He added: "I'm jolly glad they never found out at Eton!"

I nodded gravely. "Me too!" I said, "we'd never have lived it down."

"Oh phooey to Eton!" Lennie, the Cockney suddenly said. "All this goddam la-di-da! What about Nash Tufton? The sooner we meet up with that Aussie the better."

"Couldn't agree more, old boy," his Lordship said, "but I must say it's a bit thick!" he added, glaring at Fleur.

"Well, say rather, bad luck," Perce, the Lancashire lad, amended to make the peace. Fleur was not placated.

"I am finished with you all," she said with a finality that was splendid.

During this spirited altercation I had been dabbing my ear which had been bleeding heavily on to my shirt. Now Fleur decided to take me in hand, if only to spite her erstwhile fiancé.

"Here—let me! Len! Hand me the first aid, it's under the seat to the left," she told him. Len obligingly fished it out. Whilst Fleur dabbed my ear with iodine and I played with Toby's ears, his Lordship took out a map of the coast and he and Len were about to examine it carefully, when he said to me:

"Keep a sharp eye open for pursuers, will you?"

I said I would just as soon as Fleur would let me. I noticed that some of my blood had dripped on to the seat of the car.

"I've christened your car," I said. His Lordship looked up from the map.

"What?" he said. It wasn't a rude what; I think everyone at Eton said "what". It showed you had breeding.

I was about to repeat my remark when his Lordship, who had quite clearly heard me, said "It's got a name already, thanks."

"So's mine."

"So has your what?"

"So has my car," I said, regretting the whole thing.

"You got a car?"

"Of course he's got a car, haven't we told you already?" Fleur explained furiously. "It's a very nice one, much more sportive than this," she continued,

just being bloody-minded. "It's a Martin-Aston."

His Lordship corrected her absent-mindedly as he examined his map and then, with a delayed reaction, looked up and said: "Eh? A DB. eh?"

"Yes."

"*Pas mal!*"

"*'Pas mal'?*" I repeated scathingly, "*c'est du Nanon!*" I told him, but his French wasn't equal to it.

"Eh?"

"*Fantastique—crème de la crème—fà.mi'*—the bloody top, old boy!" I said with enthusiasm.

"There's no need to lose your wool, old man," his Lordship said. It was clear that he was the sort of Englishman who had never, once he had left the University, grown up. Yet this sort of Peter Pan-like quality could be endearing. He probably was very brave and very well mannered and I was quite sure he could turn on oodles of charm when he wanted to. That Fleur had plunked for him as a fiancé wasn't quite as queer as I had first imagined. His Lordship sort of grew on one.

"This old Banger of yours isn't too bad," I said, anxious to deflate myself and my worldly possessions, "at least you haven't fallen for the lark of having the affectation of your initials and a One for a number plate."

His Lordship looked shocked.

"Good lord!" he said as if there were no need for more words.

"Funny habit, any road. Affectation, perhaps," Perce, the Lancashire lad, said.

"It started in the States, actually," I imparted.

"Oh?"

"Well, in a slightly different way. Over there if you rate—that's if you are a big shot, State Governor or something like that, you get a very low number. People anxious to impress pull strings to get a low number. It's much like ours," I exclaimed.

"Bloody snobbishness!" Lennie the Cockney decided.

"Nonsense!" Fleur said, completing work on my ear. "And I shall work on Garway here to get G.T.1 on his Aston."

"I may not be able to. It may be bagged already."

"Bagged . . . ??" Fleur began.

"Not now, Fleur; at least, I shouldn't," I said as I glanced out of the window, "that nasty Merc's coming up—and coming up fast!" I told them.

"*Mon Dieu!* This," said Fleur Lemmonier, "is where we came in!"

* * *

At the news that we were being chased, Len the Cockney was delighted. He emitted an Indian-like war cry and raised the tommy gun. He was about to poke it through the rear window when Lord Beverlow stopped him.

"Easy, Len!" he cautioned. "We'll play this a different way." He leant forward and whispered to his driver, who nodded.

"Now, let's see," his Lordship murmured, "I think it would be advisable if you were all to get nicely set—"

"Preferably on the deck!" I suggested, "these boys

start hurling stuff once they are in range. I know," I added, "Fleur and I have had some!"

I noticed that Neddy Beverlow frowned at the way I linked myself with Fleur.

"You'd all better get down and curled up."

"It sounds like beddy-byes," the Lancashire lad gagged.

"We may take a bit of a bump," Neddy Beverlow said in a matter-of-fact sort of way. I looked at him in surprise.

"A bump?"

His Lordship nodded. I noticed his eyes were glittering. Though he was outwardly composed, he was inwardly intensely excited. He looked up observing that I had been scrutinizing him.

"You ever do any big game hunting, Trenton?" he asked.

"I'm against all forms of hunting," I imparted, adding, "except, of course, women!"

He let this go though I could sense Fleur, who had been listening, stiffen, narked as women do get narked at the thought of any mormonistic tendencies in any man they felt owed them allegiance.

"We'll argue about it sometime," his Lordship said. "But I'm sorry you haven't because you'd feel like I do at this minute."

"I feel like I felt when I left the Indom on an interceptor raid and I expect it's much the same," I retorted.

"What's this about hunting women—?" Fleur began querulously, but the Cockney interrupted.

"Look, Neddy, those yobs are just about within range. I could pop their front tyres as easy as Crossing Tower Bridge."

But his Lordship was adamant.

"This way is better. You'll see," he said. "It preserves our dignity, too. No gun shots," he said. Once more I looked at him in surprise. It was only a few moments ago that he had used the tommy with ominous effect; but it was true, this was in the Headquarters of the Guardelli mob and I suppose that hadn't counted. I rather wished I'd been at Eton the same time as Neddy, he must have been quite a character.

"I say," I asked, "were you in Pop?"

Neddy smiled. A rare thing for him and extremely agreeable when he did so—perhaps because of its rarity.

"I'd have got hell from Pa if I hadn't been!" he replied affably. "Pa," that, too was typical. Affectation, of course, but affection played way down—a sort of studied casualness.

Suddenly above the noise of the cars travelling at speed we heard the sinister cough of a Sten.

"Well," his Lordship said in his any-more-for-tennis voice, "I should imagine now's about the right time. Everybody down and hold on tight."

Fleur dropped elegantly to the Rolls' carpet and I tucked myself alongside, holding Toby. Reluctantly Len the Cockney put down the tommy and spread himself on the seat, gripping the sides of the Rolls with hands and feet.

"Now brace yourselves!" his Lordship commanded. We did so.

"Now!" he yelled and the driver jammed on the brakes. There was a tremendous tyre-screach and then a violent bang, a great crash of glass and a jolt that had the Cockney tumbling over us and Toby yelping. The impact had winded us and we were all gasping as we took stock. Two of the Rolls windows had splintered but not broken. I peered out quickly. The Merc had closed up behind us with the Rolls' luggage grid neatly through its bonnet from which water was pouring. The windscreen had been smashed and there was a pile up of bodies inside.

By now his Lordship had given the command for the driver to move off. There was a sickening tearing sound of sheet metal being prised away and we pulled away. We were all pretty shaken except for Neddy Beverlow who was like an excited schoolboy.

"Wasn't that terrific?" he said.

"You were taking a hell of a chance, weren't you?"

"Not really," he replied, adding, "actually I had the luggage grid especially reinforced just for that purpose."

"You mean you were expecting trouble?"

Beverlow looked at me in surprise.

"Of course," he said. "I'm always looking for trouble. I get a bang out of it." he confessed.

Sixteen

WE moved rapidly away from the bust-up Merc. His Lordship was grinning delightedly. "Shocking bad form the way some types don't stop after an accident," he said.

"They were very, very quiet," Perce added.

"Too ruddy true!" agreed Len the Cockney.

"You can put that nasty-looking tommy gun away, now, Len," his Lordship suggested, "there's a nice place for it under the seat which I also had built." Naddy turned to me. "And do try to stop that dog from such a cacophony, Youki, Dick, Toby, Sholto, whatever he's called."

"Sholto!" I jeered. "That's the name for red setters. All red setters are called Sholto," I averred.

"I know. I've got one at home," his Lordship said simply.

Whilst Fleur attempted to placate the excited Toby, I found myself speculating about the engagement of Fleur and his Lordship. Feature-wise as the Yanks have it, it wasn't so bizarre a set-up ally; they were two good-looking people who would look right in the

rightest of environments. One could picture them dancing at the *Four Hundred* or arriving very late at the theatre—to the annoyance of the more punctual members of the audience—not to mention the cast on stage. One could see them at the Lawn Tennis Finals or at Eton for the Fourth. And of course at film *premières*. His Lordship immaculate in tails and a white carnation walking slightly behind Fleur deferentially so that, often as not, it was her full face and his left shoulder that made the next Dailies. Perhaps, too, on safari. Fleur cool, elegant, in a white linen two-piece and a wide-brimmed straw hat, his Lordship of course in a topee. His Savile Row tropical weight cream suit immaculately tailored, his one concession to colour perhaps the Old Etonian tie? Or at Longchamps, perhaps, photographed with Madam Suzy Volterra's party and again, at Le Mans. Yes, they made a handsome couple, old fashioned in that they would be in the right place in the right clothes at the right time, but behind that splendid façade—what went on? How right were they for one another, that's what really fascinated me. Physically his Lordship was obviously attracted to Fleur but what about Fleur? Was it position, money, the desire to have a British title? I pondered a great deal about it. For, if his Lordship was waist-high in skulduggery and there was every chance with the sort of high-jinks in which he was involved he would be in serious trouble and I meant gaol-like trouble, then would Fleur be pleased about that? No, there appeared to be something more to the romance than was normal and it obviously intrigued me. My

speculative reverie was broken by a mocking voice saying:

"A penny for 'em!"

I looked up in surprise to find Len the Cockney watching me avidly.

"No blinkin' fear!" I retorted with a grin.

"I'd like to know more about you," he said.

"Me, too!" I replied pointedly.

"Oh *Mon Dieu*, not again!" Fleur exclaimed in disgust. "Len, dry up!" she commanded. Len dried.

* * *

"I suppose you'll collect your car and drive into Alessio to see your fiancée." Fleur said, all moué-mouthed and wide-eyed. I decided that this was not the time or place to counteract my relationship with Charity Stockton.

"Of course," I averred stoutly.

"And a word of advice, chum," Len said. "Now that you are out of this, stay out!"

"Thank you. I feel like the character in almost any Damon Runyon story—the guy who's standing on the sidewalk minding his own business when ker-plunk—he's in it!"

"Except, of course, that you were driving along," Fleur reminded me, "in your lovely car."

"I am well aware of the way it all happened!" I retorted.

Suddenly Fleur looked puzzled.

"Where are we going?" Fleur asked Neddy Beverlow.

"Nice Airport," he replied. "Thanks to Trenton who

remembered your passport we can pop you on to a 'plane for London."

Fleur made a grimace and then said quietly. "There may not be any seats." It was something Neddy hadn't considered.

"You got any connections here, Trenton?" his Lordship enquired. "You seem to live in the South."

"Well it seems to me theré are either seats or there aren't seats, but I do know a few fellows here."

"How about Dick?"

"Dick?"

"She means Sholto!" his Lordship explained.

"Oh, you mean *Toby*!" I grinned. I patted his head.

"Shall I take him?"

"No. I'll bring him by car if they haven't swiped my car. He'll have to do six months in quarantine."

"Unless he stays with me in my Paris flat," Fleur said.

"That's an idea," I agreed. "It would give me a very good reason for popping over to Paris."

His Lordship was not amused.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he said without any gaiety whatsoever.

We stopped at the Airport Departure doors and got out to examine the back of the Rolls. Apart from a slight buckle to the specially constructed luggage grid and a loss of paint on it, of the stōp-crash there was no other evidencce. The group q<changed relieved glances. No one seemed to mind when a gendarme strolled over and chuckled with good humour—that is, no one but me.

"Let's look at the departure board," I suggested, "to see what's going out. It could be that Fleur will have to go to Paris or Geneva and then on to London."

"That would be fine," Fleur said cutting in quickly. "I could stop off in Paris and get some clothes."

"No thank you," his Lordship said.

"But I've got no luggage and not a stitch to wear."

"Too bad," his Lordship said, acting tough.

"No money either." Fleur quickly said. His Lordship looked at us. "Anyone got any money?" he asked.

"I've got about twenty quid, I think," I said, fishing into my back pocket.

"I've got a fiver, too," Len said.

"Here's a couple of quid," Perce added.

"There you are—plus two hundred new francs—" said Neddy collecting our contributions, "why, you're a positive Croesus!" he added.

"Except you're the wrong shape—thank Gawd!" Len added.

"Twenty-seven pounds and two hundred francs won't get me far," Fleur averred.

"You'll have to eat in—"

"Or 'phone up some boy friends," she said maliciously. Neither his Lordship or I deigned to answer.

We walked into the Airport and I went to see my old Air France friend Maurice Angenoust, but there wasn't a chance on the Caravelle. Fortunately B.E.A.'s Gaston Naniche said there was a single tourist left on the Comet. We had some time to spare so we sat on the terrace, with an occasional apprehensive glance

round, drinking until it was time for Fleur's departure.

The Airport restaurant manager was a decent cove, he fixed Toby up with a good meal. The poor little tyke was ravenous and I mentally chalked up another memo to give a further clout to Guardelli when next we met.

When the 'plane departure was tannoyed, Fleur, surrounded by males of varying sorts and sizes, and reluctant, it seemed to me, was given a real cruiser escort towards the barrier. But, as our posse approached, Fleur suddenly emitted a little cry of delight.

"Oh, good!" she exclaimed and darted away from us.

For a moment Neddy Beverlow thought she was running off.

"After her!" he shouted, and then as Fleur stopped next to two French sailors at the bookstall, tried to look unconcerned, but I heard him mutter under his breath: "*Now* what?"

We closed in on Fleur who, having reached the sailors, had taken up a magazine from the stall as if undecided whether to buy it or not and was inching nearer to the sailors as we drew up to her.

"Go away!" she whispered.

"Don't tell me you have a thing about matchlots? If so I'll fish out my old uniform, tho' it is a bit gangrenous now!"

"Go away, chéri!" Fleur repeated, edging near to the French sailors.

"Lemmonier! What in heaven's name are you doing?" I pleaded. As Fleur drew nearer to the men in

so furtive a manner it looked as if her grandfather must have been related to Fagin. For one supremely foolish moment I thought she was going to pick their pockets.

"Fleur!" I expostulated, in my anxiety omitting to use her surname.

"Will you be quiet!" Fleur retorted, now angry.

"I only want to touch their pom-poms," she explained.

"Eh?" his Lordship gawped.

"For luck," Fleur explained.

"Come again?" Len requested blankly.

"An old French custom. You touch the sailor's red pom-pom. It brings you good luck."

We all seemed to breathe out in relief at the same time.

"I see!"

I was just about to ask why the stealth when, as Fleur lifted her hand and touched one of the sailor's be-pom-pommed hats, the matelot turned and caught her. I somehow expected that he would be angry: if all France went around trying to stroke sailors' caps, it must be rather tiresome for them but this particular character beamed. It could of course be that Fleur made a pleasant change to most of the good-luck seekers.

"Aha!" said the sailor. "Caught you! You'll have to pay for your good luck!" he said.

Fleur nodded as if she had known that this would be expected of her. She kissed the sailor on the cheek but this wasn't enough for the ardent young man. He decided to make a meal of the whole thing and then his friend clamoured for his "share". I now realized

why Fleur had tried to be so crafty about the procedure. Eventually with a "Do you mind?" it was Len the Cockney who rescued Fleur. Beverlow looked down his aristocratic nose, Gallio-like caring for none of this.

"You touch a French pom-pom for luck," Fleur reiterated.

"So you told us," I said as we all moved away, followed by the farewell whistles of the French sailors.

"Now I shall meet some divine young man on the plane," she added, mischievously.

Beverlow and I said nothing. Now we walked in silence to the passport barrier.

"Good-bye, Poppet," Neddy said. "See you in the *Ritz-Rivoli* bar in a matter of hours."

"If you get it back from Nash Tufton," she reminded him.

"I'll get it back," he assured her. He took out the engagement ring.

"Look," he gagged, "I bought you a present." He held it out for Fleur to take. She pretended that she didn't recognise it.

"Why, thank you, but strangely enough I gave mine back to the man who *was* my fiancé not long ago," she snubbed. His Lordship made a grimace.

"Ouch!" exclaimed Len. "Baby it's cold outside! So long, kid!"

"Bye Len, 'bye boys." Fleur turned to me. "*Au revoir*, Trenton."

"Bye for now, Lemmonier!"

It was her turn to suggest a rendez-vous but I

couldn't be sure if she did so just to irritate Neddy, you know how women are.

"When will I see you?"

"In about a couple of weeks," I replied. "I'll take you to dine at the *Genevieve*, and you'll think you're back in France again."

"That'll be nice for her!" his Lordship cut in. Fleur flashed him a nasty look.

"I'll be at the *Connaught*," she said, adding, "why do you smile?"

"I felt it would be *Brown's* or the *Connaught*," I replied, "with *Claridge's* running a lousy third."

"I can't get half what you snobs talk about!" Len said almost angrily. To mollify him Fleur reached up on tiptoe and brushed her lips across his cheek. He was in a seventh heaven of delight.

"Ah!" he said, "that I can understand!"

Because she was a pal of mine, Gaston himself came to escort her to the waiting plane.

"I still haven't been told what the hell it is you are all after," I said querulously.

"Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird*!" Fleur said. "See you at the *Genevieve*!"

"See you in the Big Smoke, Fleur," Len added, "that's if we're not in the Bastille!"

Fleur looked at us with just the trace of amusement and then turned to join Gaston. I thought this is all too good to be true—such charm, such innocence, such dulcet-wide-eyed innocence. His Lordship must have been thinking along the same lines for he said, breathing a sigh of relief, "Thank God, there's no stop between

Nice and London!" We waited until after the 'plane's taxi out, the warm-up and the actual flight out over the sea and the turn along the coast.

"What! No parachute jump?" I gagged, but his Lordship didn't think it was funny.

Seventeen

“NOW,” said Len, “let’s find that ruddy Aussie, Nash Tufton, but,” pointing at me, “let’s lose this geezer first.”

“Ta ever so. You’re really stuck on me.”

“Like prussic acid!” the Cockney exclaimed.

We drove back towards Nice.

“I’ll drop you at the *Negresco*, if that’s all right with you?” Beverlow said. “We’re off in the opposite direction.”

“You mean you know where to find Tufton or are you giving me the old double-bluff?” I enquired.

“That’s enough out of you!” the Cockney retorted belligerently.

“No comment,” Neddy Beverlow said.

When we reached the Boulevard des Anglais we were considerably slowed up. His Lordship cursed quietly under his breath. His eyes were still dancing with excitement. I would have liked to have known more about whatever it was that caused his adrenalin to zoom through his system the way it did.

“I suppose one day I’ll read all about you in the more lurid Sundays,” I prodded.

"Could be," he said, frowning at the traffic and the crowds. "Could be."

"I hope you'll be in the Scrubs—so much more convenient than an out-of-town gaol. For visitors, I mean."

"Nark it, guv!" Perce requested.

"Yes, put a sock in it!" snapped Len.

"What's this?" I said in mock surprise, "two Old Etonians and two old Borstlians? *Entente cordiale* and all that? And the driver? A graduate from the University of Narkover? What a conglomeration! What a turn-up for the book."

"Will you shut your big mouth!" Len shouted, losing his temper. But still Beverlow didn't bite.

"What is it you do for kicks, Beverlow?"

"Eh?" He feigned that he didn't understand.

"Early on you told me you did this for kicks. What is this? I mean, apart from stopping your Rolls in its tracks and erasing people?"

"What's 'erasing' mean? What's it mean?" Perce enquired anxiously. No one answered him.

Then, surprisingly, suddenly, "I bore easily, Trenton," his Lordship said softly. "I always did. A short life and a merry one," he added. He turned to me: his blue eyes, wide, seemingly so innocent, had a George Washington look about them, very beguiling.

"I suppose you who write about excitement find that enough? That's your kick?"

"I write about romance mostly."

"Gush!" the Cockney said succinctly.

"Put your hat on, chum," I said.

"Why?" he enquired in surprise.

"I'm going to kick your spine through it!" I said belligerently. Len glared but let it pass.

"I suppose the idea of hunting big game shocks you?" Neddy continued.

"Not shocks, it nauseates. Have you ever killed an elephant?" I asked him. Beverlow nodded. "You got a kick out of that?" I could see that, for a fraction of a second, his Lordship hesitated. "Well, did you?" I asked.

"To be honest, Trenton, no I didn't. I didn't really like that."

"Well, you're honest. So you just killed it for kicks, eh?" I needed. "That's fine!"

"No. Not for kicks. Not that time. I only killed one. I wouldn't do it again."

"No? Then, why once?"

Again, for a fraction of a second, his Lordship paused.

"Well?" I goaded. "Not just for a bang?"

Then quickly as if making up his mind to explain, to exonerate himself, Neddy Beverlow said, "Actually it was a dare. The professional hunter I was with sort of challenged me," he said, and as soon as he had done so, I could tell that his Lordship was sorry that he had confided this. I was puzzled and I didn't pursue the subject. Len said:

"I'd like to get me a lion. I'd like that, very much. That must be something. Quite something!"

Perce plunked for a rhino. I didn't attempt to argue, I was thinking about Neddy Beverlow and then it

struck me, I cut in across the big game conversation and asked Beverlow:

"Wasn't your elder brother killed in the War?"

"Yes."

Then it dawned on me, of course, that's where the trouble lay. Obviously he had spent a childhood trying to prove he was as tough as his brother. It was a childhood neurosis. Beverlow was always trying to prove he was as brave as the next chap—braver.

"I bet you did something really screwy to get that M.C." I said.

"*Did* you get the M.C., Ned?" Len asked him interestedly.

"The only mad thing I did was to join up!" his Lordship averred, ignoring the question.

"I suppose you were the youngest subaltern in the Brigade?" I hazarded a guess.

"Yes, actually I was," Neddy Beverlow admitted. Then, because the conversation was becoming too "touchy", he added: "We're nearly at the *Negresco*, Trenton."

"O.K. Sir Galahad!" I retorted. He didn't like it.

When the Rolls pulled up at the hotel entrance the commissionaire recognised me and tore off a neat salute.

"Ah! Mistaire Trenton!" he greeted me. "The sun always shines when you come to town."

"Tell him to switch off the blarney!" growled the Cockney.

"You tell him!" I retorted, "he doesn't get half what I say!"

"*Touché*, Len, *touché*, I'm afraid," his Lordship said,

adding, "Well Trenton, see you at Lord's next year?"

"If you're not making mail bags!" I reminded him. I nodded to the others. "So long, blokes, I'll bake a nice big cake for you."

"What for? Someone's birthday?" Perce enquired.

"He's just being' funny," Lennie said with a sneer.

"A nice big cake with a key in the centre."

"Eh?" Perce still didn't catch on.

"To help you to escape," I explained.

"——in your whisky!" the Cockney said. "Come on, Ned, let's go!"

Though Neddy winked gravely, the others didn't bother to wave. I watched the driver pull out and, to the irritation of the following motorists, make a wide right hand turn that had the point duty gendarme practically doing nip-ups. He was so taken aback he didn't even blow his whistle. I watched the Rolls move back in the direction of the Airport and wondered where they would find Nash Tufton. Cap d'Antibes? Cannes, perhaps? As I turned to the commissionaire I caught a flash of Louga in a yellow Dauphine. With her was Guardelli. They had obviously seen the Rolls and were following it. But they were keeping a very, very respectable distance from it.

* * *

The commissionaire of the *Negresco* looked at Toby who I had in my arms.

"Ah Dick!" He patted Toby's head.

"His name is not Dick," I said.

"Ah! Youki then?" he guessed.

I glared at him. "His name is Toby," I corrected him. He nodded as if to say that that was a pity. I asked him to get me a taxi.

Once in the taxi I had more time to examine poor old Toby's burnt front paws and I cursed 'Mister Guardelli for being a sadistic bastaid. The first thing I planned to do was to take Toby to a vet on my arrival in Alassio to see what could be done for the little blighter and to find out if the paws would ever heal up completely. As I held him in my arms he looked up at me with his big brown eyes seemingly with such gratitude that he all but had me in tears. I knew that it was wrong in this day and age of psychiatric conviction but I couldn't help wishing I could get me a nice hot iron and go to work on the soles of Gualdelli's tootsies.

It was a fabulous afternoon and I wondered if there was anywhere quite so pleasant in the sun as the 'Cote d'Azur—well, England, perhaps, when the sun was shining was nigh on "Perfick" as H. E. Bates' Mr. Larkin would have put it. I thought Toby would certainly enjoy his walks in the Green Park once we were back in the metropolis.

We drove along the *Inférieur Corniche* to collect Ming, the Aston. Between Villefranche and Beaulieu the road overlooks Cap Ferrat and in the bay, riding at anchor was the U.S. *Newport News* and her attendant destroyers: I thought about my bizarre meeting with young Jess Talbot and wondered if we would ever meet-up again. I wondered, too, if the photo of "Fifi" had impressed his messmates. The Aston seemed to be untouched

when I picked her up. Nevertheless, I went over it most gingerly before I tucked myself in behind the driving wheel. I gave her a short warm-up and headed for the Italian border.

This time there was no Merc following with madmen taking pot shots nor, alas! was there an elegant perfumed lady at my side. The nearer I got to Ventimiglia the more I wondered if I still felt the same about Charity Stockton—now that I had met Fleur Lemmonier.

* * *

It certainly was pleasant to present my passport to the Customs at the border and know that this time I would be allowed straight through. Toby was not quarantined here though he would be once I landed with him in England. I was sorry that the same team of men were not on duty when I passed through, but I hoped to see them on the return. I wanted to apologise for my sister's season ticket.

I had placed the Colt I had taken from the Fanatic when Jess Talbot had rescued me, in the small compartment by the petrol intake. This could only be opened from the inside of the Aston and was a useful if obvious place to stow a gat—if you were in the habit of stowing gats, of course. I decided the best way of getting past a severe check by the Italians was immediately to open up the Aston bonnet. The Italians were mostly car-mad. This did the trick, in no time I had half a dozen inspectors peering into the bonnet. Patiently I waited until a long line of suffering tourists,

awaiting inspection, could stand it no longer. Their insistent and vociferous tooting finally brought the Italians out of the bonnet and with many smiles and lots of flicking of hands which indicated that Ming's innards were formidable, I was on my way.

Ventimiglia is no distance from the frontier and even less in a D.B. and I was speedily in the arms of Charity Stockton and, a few minutes later, swimming in the jolly old Med. to a convenient raft. The rest of the house party tactfully swam around it but left us to it whilst we made it up with soft whispers and a certain amount of nuzzling which on a raft on an undulating sea in the sun was not without its romantic side.

I did not think it necessary or wise to impart anything about my getting mixed up with Fleur Lemmonier or Lord Edward Galahad Beverlow. Neither did I mention one Senegalese beauty called Louga nor one squummy—bag called Guardelli. I merely said that I had been delayed by a slight bit of trouble with Ming which I had had adjusted at Nice. It was unfair to the Aston but I was sure that, under the circumstances, David Brown would excuse me.

Later on the terrace as we sat watching the sea, sipping Pernods, I had to confess to myself that the easing-up of the tension of the last few hours was delightful. Also, Charity was in a most loving mood. Earlier I said that Charity Stockton worked in Fontenham's, the smart Bond Street store. Charity was a beautiful society girl who had to get a crust. She was one of the new class that had in recent years sprung up in England. Whereas in the old days the Stocktons

always went abroad, today they went only if they were invited: the old order changeth.

Charity worked in the soda fountain department at Fontenham's and it was here that we had met. Let me hastily assure you that though I did use Fontenham's for carnations for my girls, strawberries out of season and such trivialities as bath salts, I was not in the habit of sitting up at the counter with the Debs sucking milk shakes through the odd straw.

It had been Madeline's wish, one hot afternoon, that we should stop for a nut sundae (or something equally fattening) at Fontenham's. I had met Madeline after she had attended a lecture at the Slade and we had strolled along Piccadilly that hot afternoon—it was that wonderful summer—into the delightful coolness of the Burlington Arcade and out into the sun again when Madeline had the urge for a nut sundae at Fontenham's. Charity served us. Somehow Charity and Madeline did not jell together. Charity's English rose type beauty and Madeline's dark, Gallic strikingness were in complete contrast and so too, were their temperaments. I had not engineered this meeting, in fact, quite the reverse, for, I had not until that moment known Charity, but later, I was to make sure that never the twain would meet again.

Of course it was my fault that I got to know Charity better. I had my reasons; firstly, Madeline was of course much too young for me and secondly she came from a very good class French family and you know how well brought up the young ladies are in such *ménages* and even with her relatives as far away as the Seine district,

the Parisien parental control was always in evidence. I could not, therefore, I felt, be judged a bounder and a cad when upon Madeline's temporary departure for the Fontenham's loo, I enquired of Charity if she had not a brother at Eton. That she had no brother but a cousin at Repton was a fragile but sufficient coincidence for me to talk about a school I knew once headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and founded only four years after my own in 1553. By the time Madeline had returned (what took most ladies so long in the loos of the world?), we had mentally, dog-like, sniffed one another and approved.

"Later I was in the habit of dropping into the Fontenham's soda fountain department and chatting to Charity. Then, one wet weekend, about the only wet weekend that summer, when the Stocktons had gone to stay with relatives at Penn, and left Charity to fend for herself, it was I who had to do the fending. Charity moved in for a couple of nights. My char, Lily Mertens, sniffed very disapprovingly but Lily had to thank Charity for installing the "telly" and for the Martell Three Star which Charity occasionally drank with orange juice and Lily had without, purely for medical purposes of course, when I was out.

I give you this background together with the information that Charity was a honey blonde with delightful teeth, a delicious complexion and a most agreeable figure which, as she stood at Ventimiglia in a sarong looking seawards, made me wonder why I had been so weak about Fleur Lemmonier.

We were staying with the Carlton Carruthers at

Ventimiglia. Carlton Carruthers lived in Italy on the large monies he derived from the fat sales of his thrillers, folding monies of all delightful colours not to mention nice jingly coins, non-bouncy cheques, a steady flow of dollars, pengoes, pèsetas, marks, guelders—in short, practically every nation subscribed to the Keep Carlton Carruthers In Luxury Fund, all save Russia where, it was said, the C.C. books *were* published, but Russia didn't believe in awarding authors royalties—it was decadent, or something.

Carruthers was an interesting product of the effect of the World War on the non-bellicose individual. The Bible said that the meek shall inherit the earth; and that—if one considered inherit to mean dining off silver plates, owning a yacht, driving a Rolls-Bentley, and a Facel-Vega, having a villa in Ventimiglia and a permanent suite at the *Ritz*—then the meek do inherit the earth, for that is exactly what had happened to Carlton Carruthers né Abington Meak.

We had called him Abby in the F.A.A. But one starts off at a disadvantage because if one mentions the Fleet Air Arm one instantly thinks of chaps taking off from carriers. I don't think Abby ever saw the sea, his navy time was spent on stone frigates where one could be sick but never sea sick. I think the shore establishment where he was stationed was sunk in official German communiqués once, to reassure the German population that our Navy was being systematically annihilated, and the station had a nasty blitz, luckily for Abby at a time when he was on leave. I don't impart this in a spirit of mockery, I had known too many war

giants with façades of wrought iron and innards of strawberry mousse to sneer at the chaps who, as the R.A.F. pompously referred to as those 'lacking in moral fibre'—I merely depict Abby Meak's background to show the contrast of his latter-day activity. Abby was a batman and, so far as I could tell, it was always a bit vague, but he was a bit of a case, nothing serious and certainly nothing vital enough to get him his service discharge. On all the big R.N. air stations the job of looking after the officers was performed by the Wrens and a sweet and efficient and smart bunch of girls they were, too. For example, there was, at the F.A.A. Fighter School at Yeovilton,—but I digress. . . . Abby was a batman on one of the small satellites, Eckton Mallet which was really no more than an emergency landing field for R.A.F. Beaufighters on night intruder work or any F.A.A. trainer pilot in trouble over the Channel and not able to get back to Ford or Lee. Abby's ability if that's the right word—to remain at Eckton Mallet and not get a sea-going posting had something to do with his refusal to have dental treatment or he was a Four-Day Christian Advocate or something and didn't hold with war, a fairly bizarre viewpoint in '39. Abby wasn't a bad hat, avoiding draft, nor was he a *poseur*, he was just a quiet little man with principles—principles that didn't fit in with the Royal Navy's scheme for things. You could say that as far as Abby Meak was concerned, the Navy was a square peg in a wartime round hole, and Abby more in sorrow than anger, put up with it. One thing was certain, Abby worshipped the men of action and the

Navy pilots and the Flying A—hole boys (the Observers) were really looked after by this well-educated, (surprisingly he was Charterhouse and Clare) quiet little man with principles.

If ever any of the boys was shooting a line over the bacon and eggs (and the wartime food for the Fleet Air Arm was something!) Abby would be poised, holding the toast rack, goggle-eyed, listening to the exploits. It was ironic that there we were, all wet behind the ears and in our teens, idolised by someone older than we were and one who was, obviously, far more intelligent. I suppose it is everyone's dream to be a hero and Abby became one—on paper, after the cessation of hostilities.

It wasn't until some years later that I found out that Carlton Carruthers was the *nom de guerre* of my old batman Abington Meak. Of course, I had read the Carruthers stories, tough exploits of a modern Robin Hood who bashed, kicked, shot, gouged his way into the hearts of the large leading papers who had, perhaps because of two Armageddons in the same century, felt the need for tough reading matter. Carlton Carruthers' main character, one D'Arcy Danger, made the Charteris' Saint appear almost a cissy and the James Hadley Chase stories seem almost prosaic. Abby really piled on the agony—and the paper-back public lapped them up, in languages that ranged from Chinese to Hindustani.

During the war, I had begun to write romantic novels whilst on carriers to alleviate the long stretches of boredom which, as all personnel on active service

know to be most of the time a time peppered by the sudden short, spasmodic excitement of actual warfare. I was lucky enough to get a hit with the reading public with my *Lilac is for Lovers* soon after the war and I had been invited as one of the guests of honour at a Foyle's Literary Luncheon, and I found myself sitting next to Abby Meak who told me, in that hesitant, near stutter that he had taken up writing after his demob. I was more than a little surprised to see him there and sitting at the top table but there was listed among our polyglot pen personalities an erudite poet and I idly wondered if Abby were he.

• Imagine my surprise when the M.C. announced Carlton Carruthers and Abby rose to his feet. Apparently I had treated Abby decently when he laid out my tiddly suit and performed the usual irksome batman duties for me in the F.A.A. and so he was pleased to re-meet me and perhaps crow a bit—for Abby Meak, now Carlton Carruthers, had, indeed, hit the jack pot.

And that was how I happened to be on his house party near Ventimiglia. Every summer he asked a dozen of us to stay and his friends or acquaintances were usually heterogeneous, pixilated and bizarre headline personalities. This summer Abby had invited the painter, Hewson Tite. His particular gimmick was painting dandelions. He painted them all the time and in all sorts of colours and the critics were very, very pleased with him. Hewson was an agreeable cove who always seemed perplexed that he had become an international figure. One felt that he secretly would

like to get away from dandelions but that he was scared, successwise, to do so.

Also in the party was the delightful young playwright Meriel Fitzsimmons, surely one of the most witty and attractive of the up-and-coming young dramatists. She was always a hit in house parties provided the actress Desdemona Dyke was also invited. Many was the time I had seen the excited look of the male guest when he saw Meriel Fitzsimmons enter the lounge on the first evening of a new house party. Alas! Meriel was not for burning; Desdemona took care of the little charmer's sex life, and it had seemed quite a pity, but their sense of fun and their wit made up for the blank space they left in the male beds at weekends. The punkish, erudite and quite intolerant T.V. personality Sherman Tuck was also "on the party" and he slaughtered reputations with great boisterous slashes of the most outrageous and entertaining statements. Small, pixie-like, and seemingly ingenuous, he was a brain in a million but he preferred a luxury suite at the *Splendid* than a Fellowship at London University and weekly he played well over the top for the masses on Commercial T.V. to get it.

The Livingstones, well-bred, very pleasant husband and wife film team made up the party, their manners were impeccable, their clothes flawless and their performances off-stage even more studied than those on. There was Catania Proudfoot, a delightful ballet dancer who was serene, classical, detached, unapproachable, who in real life was puppy-friendly, bawdy and very anxious for continual love making.

There was a handsome matador Miguel Manolo, who spoke little English but often obliged Catania.

To add to the *mélange* (and obviously for his own amusement), Abby had, upon this occasion, added a Queen's Counsel and a saucy little piece called Toots Tingling, from one of the Strip Clubs that had mushroomed and festered in the West End in recent years.

Take a novelist and a pretty girl, a T.V. personality, a painter, a female playwright and girl friend, two West End theatre stars, a Q.C., a strip tease artiste, a ballet dancer, a bull fighter, mix with an abundance of sunshine, many *pastis* and the Mediterranean and the result was often a mess but sometimes fantastic and very amusing. Fortunately for Charity and I this strange pot-pourri turned out amusing. Dinner on the terrace was delightful, with the stars peppering the heavens and the sea a mass of moving onyx, the perfume from the pine trees pungent and heady, the conversation brilliant and the food and wine delicious. Later in the evening some of the party played bridge whilst others sat and had a chat with their brandy.

The Livingstones danced to the radiogram and so did Catania and the matador and so did Charity and I. She held me tight and I could tell she found me very desirable that evening.

"Miss me, Gar'?" she whispered in my ear.

"What do you think?"

"I think could be," she replied biting the lobe of my ear. I held her in a grip that was very tough and which excited her very much.

"Say something nice to me, Gar'," she said.

"Your body's beautiful, Mulliner, no doubt."

She jerked her hand away from my cheek to ask
"What's that?"

"A joke. It's a sort of a man's car joke—Mulliner made lovely bodies—car bodies."

"I don't want men's car jokes—just you, honeybee."

"It's a compliment."

"Maybe. Darling, let's go somewhere very private and you can kiss me."

"O.K."

We slipped out on the terrace and down to a little gazebo at the edge of the sea which made delightful sighing sounds as it gurgled and splashed the rocks.

"Yum those pine trees!"

"Yum that Charity Stockton!"

She took my hand and guided it.

"This, my honeybee, is for you," she said.

Eighteen

ABBY had not married. One got the impression that he was slightly frightened of women but his household was run by an impeccably-mannered, smart young butler, Moat who more than slightly frightened us, the guests, a more correct man I had yet to meet. Woe betide you if you failed to reach the high standard Moat set for the guests of Carlton Carruthers, even if Abby wanted you back the following year, it was Moat who made the final decision. To be barred from the Carlton Carruthers' Ventimiglia home was a worse solecism than being sent down from ~~Udine~~, it was something you rarely got over.

It was the reproachful voice of Moat, and the insistent tapping that awoke me next morning. I put my hand out to find that Charity was not alongside. I opened my eyes to find the sun streaming in through the open French windows. It was a heavenly morning and I had slept like the proverbial log. I groped my way to the door, unlocked it and tried to raise a smile for Moat who looked as cold as a Russian delegate's reply.

"I have been trying to wake you, sir!" he said icily.

"So sorry Moat, heavy sleeper, and all that."

"Your orange juice, sir. And the reason why I have tried to wake you for over an hour—a telegram."

"A telegram, Moat?"

"That's what I said, sir."

"Well, ta ever so," I replied, if only to get Moat to wince. I took it from him with a grimace.

"Not to worry, sir," said Moat, "one *sometimes* gets good news." He gave my pyjamas a sneer as he left. "Wot? No monogram?" I couldn't help giggling. Moat ignored it.

I opened the telegram. It read:

"Meet me at once lobby *Negresco* Beverlow."

"Anything wrong, poppet?" Charity enquired wandering in and stifling a yawn.

I was glad Moat had left, for Charity was clad only in a Riviera Sheba—one of those nylon nighties, midnight black, transparent, backless halter top—the lot. It would have looked better on Fleur, that was what was so sad.

I wondered about Fleur. Had anything happened to her? I said: "Not really." I knew that I would have to hand Charity the telegram or I'd never hear the end of it, but I was wondering what I could say to her. I hadn't mentioned a thing about meeting Neddy Beverlow, and certainly nothing about Fleur.

"Not really?" Charity echoed. It was a fatuous answer. I gave her the telegram.

"Who is Beverlow—Lord Beverlow?"

I nodded.

"Oh he sometimes shops at Fontenham's," Charity imparted.

"He would," I said succinctly.

"Don't be a meanie. You do, too. Come to think of it, if you hadn't—" Charity broke off. "What's he want that's so urgent, anyhow? I didn't know you knew him that well."

"Yes. He was at Eton," I explained, inferring that we had been there at the same time and were friends there. It appeared to mollify Charity.

"Run short of oof, I expect," she said.

Charity was inclined to run to expressions like "oof" and "wizard" and "good grapgnuts". You had to blame St. Michael's Petworth, or St. James' West Malvern or was it Wycombe Abbey?

"Yes, that's it," I agreed, grabbing at the suggestion. "Always was short of the old oof. Most of my pocket money went his way at college," I lied.

"Dam' sauce, trying to scrounge on you when you're abroad and short of oof," Charity continued then, after a little pause, asked "you are short of oof, Gar', aren't you?"

"Who isn't?" I replied. "Except, of course, the rich Swiss and the rich Germans."

"Well send him back a wire telling him to jump off Brighton pier."

"He's in Nice."

"I know, the *Negresco*. I can read, poppet. Will you have to see him? I'll come with you if you like. It'll be fun in the Aston. The last time we drove together was up to that May Weck Ball. You behaved disgracefully, darling and—"

"I don't think you'd better come, sweet," I said. I thought it would be just my luck that I'd meet up with Beverlow about the same time as the Guardelli

mob. I didn't fancy driving the Aston back to London with Charity in a wooden overcoat strapped on behind. Difficult to explain to a girl's parents, really. . . "We were in the lobby of the *Negresco*, sir. I'd just introduced Charity to Lord Beverlow when there was a hail of bullets . . . What was it all about, Mr. Stockton? Frankly, I've no idea. A sort of difference of opinion, if you understand me. Charity? Well, she'd come in with me from Allassio for the drive . . ."

Charity said icily "of course if you'd rather go alone."

"No. No. Do come for the drive."

"I needn't meet him. I could sit in the car outside the hotel," Charity said, making a full meal of it. "I could sit on the front while you talked or I needn't come into Nice, you could drop me off at the Reserve, Beaulieu—and pick me up on the way back—and we could have a meal at Laurent's Bistro, delish'—"

"Oh for heaven's sake, Charity!" I cut in angrily. "Don't dramatise it. I'd love you to come."

"Well, you aren't exactly demonstrating the fact. Is he so madly attractive that I can't meet him?"

"For crying out loud! When have I ever been jealous or possessive?"

"Practically all the time. You aren't the only middle-aged pebble on the beach who's got S.A."

I didn't deign to answer this, instead I said: "I'll tell Mertens to be sure to feed Toby. We'll leave within the hour if you can be ready."

"You know jolly well it'll only take me—" Charity

stopped short. "Toby!" she said. "You never did tell me about Toby. How you got him."

"Toby belongs to Neddy Beverlow," I lied.

"You mean he burnt its poor feet?"

"No," I replied, getting into the mire up to my neck. "He found Toby and it was because—"

"Then why aren't we taking Toby back to him at the *Negresco*?" Charity persisted.

"Beverlow flew down. I'm going to drive Toby back," I said. I thought 'It will be just my luck that Beverlow will turn up in the ducal Rolls just as we arrived.' However, I was so "in deep" by now, I let the whole thing go. If Charity had been less possessive, I could have casually thrown the facts that there was a Fleur Lemmonier I'd met who had been in trouble and I had vaguely sort of helped her out. The trouble was that Charity was as feminine as the rest of the species. She just couldn't be told.

I practically had to put on a cardigan—the atmosphere—despite the sun—was very chilly on that particular drive back into France.

Fortunately the Italian Customs boys made even more fuss over Charity than they had over the D.B. on the journey in. Charity delighted at the ovation, obliged by getting out of the car, presumably to stretch her legs and a great time was had by all, while the engine was examined and Charity's framework, too. I was anxious to prove to Charity that I was not the jealous type, and, of 'course, a second consideration, the Colt was still in the pocket of the petrol in-take.

When formalities had been completed, we made the run down the hill to the French side. Charity said:

"Golly, Gar"! The eye-ties really go it, don't they? I had my behind pinched five times."

"I didn't," I said pseudo-ruefully.

"Idiot!" Charity said and laughed for the first time on the trip. The French were nearly as playful and she was feeling fine by Monte Carlo, tender by Cap Estel, amorous by Villefranche and positively back in love with me at Nice.

By now I had begun to feel less apprehensive myself. I couldn't believe that the bullets would whang across the lobby of the *Negresco* and, if Beverlow needed my help, no doubt I could put Charity up at the hotel for the night or, if it looked very tough, send her back in the Aston to await me at Alassio.

Fortunately there was no tell-tale Rolls outside the hotel and, because he knew me, the commissionaire let me park right in front of the hotel entrance.

"I'll wait here, Gar' darling," Charity said sweetly.

"O.K. honey, there's a Thesaurus, some poems and Margaret Irwin's book on Drake, if you want to read," I replied, quickly getting out and leaving her. Her expression had to be seen to be believed.

I walked swiftly into the hotel and made for the reception desk when a voice stopped me.

"Hallo Trenton!" it said. I turned. Standing there was Fleur Lemmonier.

"So you got my telegram all right," she said.

"Your telegram?" I gasped.

"Yes, darling. I was very tactful, wasn't I?"

"Lemmonier! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Now is that a nice way to greet an old friend?"

"You little witch, get back on your broomstick and take off fast!"

"Don't be ridiculous, mignon, I simply had to come back—to see Toby," Fleur said.

"I'll Toby you! Look! Charity's outside in the Aston. If—"

"Charity? What, no Hope? No Faith?"

"Fleur, please! This is no time to be flippant. My girl friend—you know the one from Ventimiglia—"

"Oh your *fiancée*."

"No, my girl friend! There's quite a difference. Listen Fleur, apart from the danger of meeting up with Ned Beverlow, the Guardelli boys and girls are still around. This is lunacy!"

"Not really. You see, I need what they are all after," Fleur replied implacably.

"And what is that?" I enquired once more:

"I can't tell you, Trenton," she reasserted.

"But you've already told us that Nash Tufton has it."

"Yes I know," Fleur replied, "but he hasn't."

"He hasn't?" I gasped.

"No."

"But you said—" I spluttered.

"Yes, I know what I said darling, but I lied. It seemed simpler at the time."

"Well I'm damned!"

"So you see, there was no point in delaying at

London, was there? I had a cup of coffee—what do they do to English coffee?—at that nice London Airport and I caught a Tourist flight back.” Fleur calmly imparted, as if it were the most natural routine in the world. “Naturally, I knew you’d be worried about me so the first thing I did was to send you a telegram.”

“And here I am and a fine old mess I’m in!”

“Not at all. Get rid of your *poupée* the Charitable Mlle. Stockton-on-Tees—”

“You’re the tease, all right.”

“And I’ll meet you for lunch.”

“Fleur Lemmonier! You are barmy, bonkers, off your pretty trolley!” I began, “you—”

“O.K.” Fleur cut in cheerfully, “We’ll all have lunch. Watch this,” she commanded audaciously, “and come out in a moment.” Then, with an impudent but positively delightful wink, she walked out of the hotel and into the sunlight. She made as if to stroll casually past Ming II and then, as if surprised to see Charity sitting there, gave an excellently executed exclamation of surprise.

Why—it’s, it’s Charitable Stockton, isn’t it?”

Charity, who had borrowed my copy of the new Betjeman Poems, looked up from it.

“Eh?” She was clearly puzzled. “Yes. I’m Charity Stockton,” she corrected.

“You remember me, Fleur Lemmonier?”

Charity looked blank but smiled politely.

“At that cocktail party, you know, in London last season.”

"Bunny Whiteman's?" Charity asked, hoping she'd guessed correctly.

"Yes. Bunny's. How is he?"

Charity looked even blanker. "He?"

"Er—she. Excuse my English." Fleur said quickly.

"Fine, I think."

"Good. I'm so glad," Fleur said. "Such a sweetie!" She cooed. I positively gulped at her audacity—and her mendacity; for Fleur had never met Bunny Whiteman. I decided it was time I intervened. I hurried out, wondering how the devil I was to play it. There was a slight pause when I reached the car. I looked at these two completely contrasting beauties—the dark French camelia and the blonde British rose and thought 'I'm really in the middle here and I'd better let someone else say something!' Fleur, mouth slightly parted, waited expectantly for Charity. Finally with an expression of for-God's-sake-help-me on her lovely face, Charity said:

"Oh, may I introduce Mr. Garway Trenton? This is—er—I er—I'm so sorry I forget—?"

"Fleur Lemmonier," burbled Fleur happily. "How do you do?"

I think I must have made some sort of piscatorial opening and shutting of my mouth, but I don't think I managed to raise even a murmur.

"Charitable and I met at Bunny's," Fleur panzered on. "Weren't you there?"

Again I tried to say something but I don't think my vocal chords did their stuff.

"Are you staying at the hotel?" Fleur enquired.

"No, actually we are outside Ventimiglia."

"We?" Fleur maliciously quoted, looking pseudo-archly first at Charity and then at me.

"There's a party of us," I quickly explained.

"How nice!" Fleur said tartly, adding, "are you doing anything now?"

"Well, I was looking for Lord Beverlow and—"

"Neddy? What a coincidence!" Fleur said imperturbably.

"You know him?" Charity enquired.

"Intimately, dear, what a darling."

"So I'd better wait—" I said lamely.

"No point in that, mon vieux, he's out," Fleur said succinctly.

"But he sent me a telegram, asking me to meet him at once," I retorted. Meanwhile I noticed that Charity was studying the attractive Lemmonier who always had a certain *savoir faire*, a delightful composure. Even if Fleur had been on the Night Flight and had no luggage I could tell Charity was captivated.

"Oh you know Neddy. It was probably something quite trivial," Fleur said reassuringly. "Come on, let's all go and have a champagne cocktail!" she suggested gaily.

"What a good idea!" said Charity.

Nineteen

IN retrospect I had to chuckle at the smooth way Fleur Lemmonier had turned on the charm at that strange cocktail *a trois*.

“Are you at Roedean, my dear?” was one of her better lines and Charity, loving it, had blushed appreciatively, replying:

“Good heavens! I don’t look *that* young, do I?”

“But of course, my dear. In fact I wondered if I did right to ask you to drink anything stronger than a coca?”

In no time the two women were arranging a further meeting and when Fleur came to London it would be Charity who “showed” her the town and, of course, introduced her to the assistant manager at Fontenham’s, so that she should have the full preferential treatment. It was not without its humour that Charity was unaware that she was at that very moment getting “the preferential treatment”. For my part, whilst I sat admiring the elegant way Fleur was handling the provocative situation that she had deliberately created, my heart was in my mouth at the thought that, at any moment she might drop the proverbial clanger—and

even more worrying—the fact that Louga and Guardelli were somewhere in the vicinity. That is, if they had lost the Rolls or if Beverlow and company returned and did not proceed towards Cannes.

“Mr. Trenton, would you be kind enough to order me some cigarettes?” Fleur ordered in between the top-speed conversation that now proceeded between Charity and herself. It was something like a conversational tennis match with the verbal volleys whamming across the net and me, umpire-like, neck this way, then that, getting in the occasional one-line pronouncement.

I ordered Fleur a packet of *Marigny*. When they arrived Fleur took them and absent-mindedly stripped off the cellophane but Charity’s beautiful eyes narrowed.

“That’s odd,” she said, “how did you know what brand Mlle. Lemmonier smoked?”

It was as if I had had a neat blow to the solar plexus. I was metaphorically out for the count. But not Fleur. She leaned forward and said, woman to woman stuff:

“As a matter of fact, I can’t bear *Marigny*, but I wasn’t going to be rude, etc. . I suppose Mr. Trenton happens to like them. Men!”

“Actually I smoke *Luckies*. That’s, in France,” I replied.

“That sounds odd.”

I wasn’t going into the *Marignys-Luckies-Abdullah* routine I had given Fleur earlier as we had driven along the coast, instead I said:

“Can I persuade you to have a *Luckie*,?”

“No, I’ll have one of the *Marigny*. Thank you.”

The page boy I had seen Fleur whispering to before She came out of the hotel now approached.

"Mille. Lemmonier?"

"Yes?"

"Telephone Mademoiselle."

"Do please excuse me one moment?" Fleur said. She tripped daintily back into the hotel.

"Isn't she a living doll?" Charity enthused, "quite adorable."

"She *is* rather a lamb," I replied, under-playing it atrociously.

"A lamb? She's simply sweet!" Charity said. Her face clouded. "But to be quite honest, Gar', I don't remember meeting her at Bunny Whiteman's."

"Don't you?" I retorted brazenly. "I do. 'One couldn't forget that personality once you'd met it!' I enthused, then realized as Charity chilled a little I'd overdone it.

"Of course everyone was at Bunny's *but everyone*—and I got cornered by some revolting little man who had the most audacious ideas" Charity's eyes flashed angry remembrance and then softened as she smiled at me. "Ideas, my dear man, I'd even blush at the thought of putting into practice with you."

"Really, Charity!" And I didn't have to feign that I was shocked. Fleur was returning from the hotel.

"Men!" Charity scoffed. Fleur overheard this as she rejoined us.

"What about men?"

"They categorise their women. I mean, you fall into various headings—like liquorice all-sorts."

"Liquorice all-sorts? What's that?" Fleur enquired blankly.

"What I mean is, Garway here, who has known me years—"

"Really?" Fleur murmured.

"Well months, actually, sees me as the sort of Captain of Hockey type—"

"Well, you were, weren't you?" I challenged.

"Were what?"

"Captain of Hockey!"

"Oh fiddlesticks!"

"You mean Hockey sticks!"

"Oh dry up, Gar'. Where was I?"

"About the all-sorted liquorice," Fleur reminded her.

"Oh yes. Well, if a man sees you as a—well, a decent type, and all that, wild horses wouldn't drag anything but good behaviour out of him."

"That's a nice mixed metaphor."

"Oh phooey to you and your literary talents!"

"Ta—ever so!"

"What I mean is, Mlle. Lemmonier—"

"Do call me Fleur."

"May I? How charming. Well, Fleur, if a man thinks you are a saint, then he won't er—er ruffle you—"

"Unless, of course, he is a Devil. Devils love to ruffle saints, believe me!"

"Well, I don't know about French men," Charity continued, "but certainly ordinary men—"

"That's a compliment, I think," I imparted to Fleur with a grin, "to all Frenchmen."

"It's a myth about all Frenchmen."

"And Latins, too, they tell me, can be lousy lovers," I added.

"Oh come now!" Fleur said impudently, to nark me, of course.

"Well, I've heard—"

"Shut up, a minute Garway Trenton," Charity commanded, "while I try to tell Mlle. Le—I mean, Fleur, what I have in mind. It's like this, you have to be to men what they *think* you are, you have to be in whatever category they've mentally placed you and you have to—to—"

"To play it, play yourself that way? Is that it, eCharity?" I finished it for her.

"Yes, that's nearly it. So you see, if you're not that way at all or you have any other ideas or if you felt sort of emotionally different—"

"Or stepped *au dessous de votre gare*," I translated literally with a grin and Fleur grimaced.

"It's very tricky, very tricky indeed."

"I haven't made myself very clear, but I wonder if you do see what I mean?" Charity enquired of Fleur.

"I think so."

"Of course, you could go on and sub-divide it," I averred. "For example a man—and there's a polygamous streak in most of 'em—might like a hockey-type romance from, say Charity, here—or rather—" I added hastily, "the hockey-type. But be equally attached to and want the more sophisticated type of romance. . . ." I trailed off, realizing I was getting into pretty deep water, and that I hadn't brought my water-wings. Charity took a dim view.

"Go on!" she suggested, glaring at me.

"Well, Lemmonier here will bear me out, I—"

"Lemmbnier?" Charity echoed. "That's rather rude of you to Fleur, Garway," she said.

"I beg your pardon. A bad habit of mine," I said.

"Please don't apologise. I rather like it. May I call you Trenton?"

"Please do."

"By the way, I have a message for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. That 'phone call. It was from Neddy Beverlow," she lied. "He can't get back for some time. He wants you to return tonight to dine with him. He said it's most urgent."

"Oh, very well."

"He said come alone."

I mentally wiped my brow. Oh diabolically clever Lemmonier!

"I am sorry about this, Charity," I said.

"Not to worry." Suddenly Charity had a brainwave.

"I know what! Mlle. Lemmonier—I mean, Fleur—Fleur and I could dine together. How's that?"

For a second even Fleur was caught on the hop. Then she smiled in a sort of Mona Lisa-like way.

"I am so sorry that's impossible!"

* * *

She made it sound most provocative.

I could tell that Charity was nettled and so to try and ease the tension I took her shopping in Nice.

The girls had agreed to meet in Monte Carlo the

next week and though I behaved so warily it wasn't surprising when she said "What is the matter, Garway? You're looking so furtive anyone would think you'd swiped something—you aren't by chance a klepto, are you?"

"No, honeybee—in fact, they recently arrested me because I'm the sort of guy who takes things *into* stores and when I'm unobserved leave them there!"

"Ha! Ha! Highly cortical," Charity retorted crushingly. Then, changing the subject, said: "Oh take me back to Abby's villa."

"O.K."

I was glad when we were back in the Aston and zooming towards the frontier again. Outside Menton my heart was in my mouth. I was nearly out of juice and I stopped at a petrol station to fill up. The thirty gallon tank takes a few anxious moments to fill up. Halfway though the operation a Merc suddenly hove into view doing a nice line in knots. As it approached the petrol station it slowed down. I didn't wait to see if Guardelli or Louga were aboard I quickly shouted to Charity:

"Duck!"

I was standing outside the car and I made a grab at Charity and pulled her on to the floorboard. The Merc passed and for me life was suddenly in slow motion. But it passed and it went on. There was no frenzied burst of Sten gunfire, no sudden whine of bullets, no screech of brakes as thugs leapt out—the Merc just went on. Then I realized, with Charity on the floor of the Aston looking up at me as if I'd gone

completely bonkers, that the Merc—the Guardelli Merc—was completely wrecked and out of action and that I'd seen Guardelli and Co. in a Dauphine.

I grinned down feebly at Charity who glared up.

"Not the time or place for sex play, *mon vieux* Trenton," she said icily.

I shook my shoulders to remove the quick fall of snow.

"Cowboys and Indians," I said lamely.

The attendant completed the job of filling up Ming. He looked at me and made some revolting clicking noises and leered encouragingly. I tried to look dignified as I removed myself from Charity who got back into the car seat and pulled a mirror out of her handbag and started an aerial recce of her golden tresses, patting and pulling as women do and breathing ice as she did so.

"Really Gar', since you met Mlle. Lemmonier you seem to have become utterly scats," Charity said.

"Nothing at all to do with Fleur—er—Lemmonier," I replied huffily.

For the rest of the journey to Italy Charity was as cold as her name. Despite the sunshine, you could positively see the snow forming across the soft undulation of her delightful bosom. Her silence made the drive as heavy as lead. I couldn't take it for long, I said:

"You seem narked, honey."

She didn't mince matters, she retorted, challengingly:

"What's so special about your Lord Beverlow?"

"Eh?"

"Why should he want to see you alone?"

"Heavens, chick, how in hades do I know?"

Charity turned and eyed my profile as I drove at speed towards Ventimiglia. I was glad I wasn't looking her in the eye.

"You haven't become ambidextrous, have you, Garway?" she asked.

"Ambidextrous?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean," she said.

"The things you learn at Fontenham's!" I chided, derisively.

"I know to—" before she could finish I jumped in with "—To your cost?"

"Don't be silly. To—"

"To your everlasting shame?" I said kiddingly.

"You're stalling," she accused. "I was saying I know to date that you have been resolutely male—"

"And are you glad!"

"Don't be so vulgar."

"I wasn't, sweet."

"And don't 'sweet' me. I repeat, what's going on between you and Lord Beverlow?" Charity challenged.

"Nothing. Why should there be anything going on between us?"

"Firstly he sends you a telegram commanding—"

"Commanding?" I tried to make it sound preposterous.

"And you instantly obey."

"Oh really, Charity!"

"Then I learn you were at Eton together and he takes money from you—"

"Goodnight, Charity! You're really off your pretty

Hovis, all I said was he probably wanted to borrow some money, he doesn't take money from me. You make the whole thing sound quite disgusting."

"And what about the Lemmonier woman?" Charity said. I thought 'now we are getting warmer.'

"Well what about her? She's perfectly normal, wouldn't you say?" I didn't know if I dared say I found her tremendously attractive; in Charity's present frame of mind, she might think up all sorts of bizarre things, and so I let it go at that.

"Does she pimp for this Lord Beverlow?" Charity enquired.

"Now look here, Charity!" I protested explosively, "I don't know where you get these extraordinary words or these ideas—I thought Fontenham's employed the Quality."

"Oh fudge the Quality," Charity retorted succinctly. She said it in such a way and coming from her oh-so English lips, it sounded vulgar and shocking.

"There's no need to be lewd," I said loftily.

Charity merely laughed. Now I climbed onto the high horse of shocked silence.

* * *

Nor was I the popular boyo when we reached the residence of Abby. He had arranged a party aboard his yacht.

There was a carnival at San Remo (when *wasn't* there a carnival in that part of the world?) and the idea was to cruise down to it by sea. It wasn't my absence they deplored, it was the thought that I should find someone

else, other people, more desirable. This hurt. I noted Charity's disdainful look and I wondered if I could rely on her loyalty. It depended on how strongly I appealed to her physically I supposed. A nice thing if she told the assembled company that I was—to quote my Auntie from Bournemouth, "One of Those".

It wouldn't shock the assembled company not one whit—but it would be spread with the greatest of speed all over London and the ramifications would be *quelque chose*. My particular farming qualities would be wasted; and what would I do for oats?

"Well," said Abby, that papier-mâché tough author, in an aggrieved voice, "you've really mugged the party, Garway, you really have!"

"Such man's talk!" I replied unkindly. I had an idea. "Charity, I want to talk to you," I said.

"Oh Nux bars!" retorted my hockey captain.

"I want to talk to you privately and urgently," I said insistently and toughly. I turned without waiting for her reply and went out on the terrace and down to the little gazebo where, earlier, everything had been so splendid. I lit a *Lucky* and blew out great broadsides of smoke, whilst I awaited her. Would she come? I was beginning to doubt it and a real Charley I would look if she did not appear. I decided to give her another minute and then I'd go and I'd not return.

I had thrown the cigarette away and had turned to go when I heard the susurrous sound of her dress as she rustled down the primitive path to our trysting-place.

Charity was still smouldering.

"Well?" she said.

"You are behaving like a prefect caught smoking."

"I haven't been caught doing anything," Charity retorted, emphasising the "I" with obvious intent.

"Now look, honeybee, listen carefully to what I have to say. I can't tell you all partly because I don't know and partly because I don't want to get you involved. Beverlow's in trouble," I imparted. "Big trouble. I simply must help him."

Charity frowned. "But—"

"But me no buts, just believe that's all. And if I don't appear back here in three days' time go to the British Consul at Nice, or even the police there."

"The police?"

"Yes."

Charity's startled look proved that I had done my stuff well.

"Gar' don't be crazy now, remember what happened last time you got involved with someone else's problems."

"Now honeybee, don't worry but please understand. I'll be all right, honest I will."

I drew her to me and kissed her. Then she seized me and really kissed me.

"My! My!" I chided, "it must be the climate!"

"Take care, darling," she said.

"I will," I promised her. "I surely will."

Twenty

ALTHOUGH any slight connection with Fleur Lemmonier was clearly fraught with danger I looked forward to my return to that character's side. I patted Ming II, the D.B.4 GT. and, seeing a Merc ahead, I gave her the gun. We eased up behind the Merc and gave a little toot. I had no intention of passing, just tailing him. There was a close-cropped fair-haired Kraut driving it and a girl alongside with a gay silken scarf over her head. I could see the man look in the mirror and say something to the girl, then he began to pull away. I smiled to myself and cased the D.B. up to his tail once more and tooted politely. He was obviously narked for he stepped on it and pulled away again. Once more Ming II caught up, once more I tooted. By now the Kraut was livid, he waited until we had a nice piece of straight macadam ahead and he let the Merc have its reins but, thanks to David Brown, Ming II responded equally as well; I was having myself quite a ball. I did this all the way to the frontier and felt quite a cad, and enjoyed being a cad.

I took the precautions of putting the chariot into a garage behind the *Negresco* and went on foot to the

hotel. Lemmonier was waiting for me in the lounge. She seemed a trifle agitated but she went quickly into an act in which she seemed to be enjoying the fact that at least half a dozen unattached or unleashed males had miraculously appeared and draped themselves around the lounge pretending to examine their nails, or read a paper or just stare.

I all but kissed her hand, leaving the required quarter of an inch between lips and finger tips. Her hand smelt of Schiap's Si and I liked it. I said:

"You seem to have gained a few new admirers or are they cops?"

Fleur Lemmonier smiled.

"How did Mlle. Stockton say it? They are my liquorice allsorts."

"Well done Lemmonier!" I applauded then added, "I suppose they aren't Guardelli's jolly jokers are they?"

"If so," she said urbanely, "they are too over-sexed to be of much use to him."

"Nevertheless, if we are going to talk, I suggest we pop across and look at the briny."

"Briny?"

"The wet stuff across the road," I said. "I doubt if we'll be cut off in our prime on the Promenade des Anglais but, of course, one never can be sure."

As we left the hotel Fleur asked, oh-so-casually, "and you have managed to placate your hockey captain?"

"'Placate'? You can surely *gazoviller* le roast beef!" I retorted. "But you, Mam, are a fiendish witch!"

"Is that a good thing to be?" Lemmonier asked. Her big eyes deliberately widened as she peered up at me.

"No, bad!"

"Is bad good?"

"Sometimes. Don't be so ruddy provocative, just tell me what's on your delicious little mind."

We selected two deck chairs away from anyone else and I offered her a *Marigny*. She made no comment but she shot me a look that needed no dialogue. When I lit it for her I noticed that her hand was trembling.

"Have you seen your Noble Lord since you returned from London?" I asked her.

"No I haven't traced him yet. But I have been located by *them*," Fleur said. She gave me a note and her hand shook a little as she did so.

"You seem to be a little excited," I said as I took the note.

"Nervous."

"Scared?"

"A little."

I read the note. It was written on *Negresco* stationery in a pleasant copper-plate and was in French. Attached to it was a cutting from the *Nice-Matin*. It said:

"We have your Mr. Tufton. We hold the man Pat, too. Put what we want in an orchid and leave in a box at Reception by nine tonight. No tricks or Pat goes the way Tufton went."

I whistled.

"I am glad you are able to whistle, Trenton," Fleur said. "My mouth is too parched."

"Then you need a brandy purely for medicinal purposes, of course! So they got your mob," I mused.

"Some of them."

"I wonder how."

"Me, too. But read the cutting."

I did so. It was an account of an accident with a speedboat in which an unidentified man was decapitated by the propellor of a speedboat. The owner of the speedboat had had no idea the man was anywhere near his craft.

"My God!" I gasped. "No wonder you need a brandy! They've killed this Tufton, then!"

"We must go to the morgue, Garway."

"Can you identify a—" I paused, "a headless corpse and would you want to?"

"I want to be sure it is Tufton. I shall be sick of course."

"But—without his jolly old knapper?"

"Tufton had a tattoo on his shoulder. The Australian flag," Lemmonier explained.

I nodded. "O.K. let's go."

* * *

We had a double brandy and took a taxi to the morgue. It wasn't an experience I wanted to repeat. Fleur had cooked up some story about her missing brother. She was pale and agitated and they allowed

her in to take a gander. It was all very clinical, impersonal but hair-raising.

They brought him out of his ice box and I thought Fleur would faint at the headless trunk. It was sun-tanned and rather beautiful in its impersonal way. The flag of Australia crudely tattooed on the shoulder, was there all right. I was holding Fleur by the shoulder to steady her and I made to turn away but then Fleur did an odd thing. She stepped forward and moved the sheet away from the corpse as far down as his knees. She stared for a moment at him and abruptly turned away, explaining to the sympathetic custodian.

"I am so sorry. It is not my brother." There were tears in her eyes but they were tears of joy. Suddenly Fleur was elated. We hurried out and sat on the nearest bench.

"They haven't got Nash," she said triumphantly.

"But—but—the tattoo mark?" I said.

"Put on to try and fool us. That is not Nash," she averred.

"How do you know?"

"Nash was circumcised," she said.

I stared at Fleur Lemmonier in astonishment. We must have stood looking at one another for five seconds before I said, "But I thought you were engaged to Ned Beverlow."

Fleur looked back at me steadfastly, thinking of the explanation she planned to give me. "Look, Trenton," she said calmly, "I could tell you to mind your own business—"

"But?"

"But I won't." She paused again before she

continued. "Ned's fine, a gentleman always. But sometimes a woman gets tired of being a lady."

I thought of my Hockey Captain, the ladylike Charity Stockton and I understood what Fleur meant, women certainly could behave in the oddest manner sometimes and ladies could so easily be brazen—it depends so much on mood, atmosphere, and a great deal of female psychology, the male couldn't dig.

"Remember that, Trenton." Fleur prodded me out of my reverie.

"Clearly I will," I retorted, adding, "is that the end of the story?"

"Yes. Unless you insist on the sordid—is that the word—?"

"It could be!"

"—The sordid details, then."

"I don't want the sordid details, Fleur Lemmonier, but if Nash appeals to you sexually—"

"Frankly, yes he does," she stated quite matter-of-factly.

"Isn't that a little unfair on your fiancé?"

"We'll talk about that sometime, Mister Garway Trenton, meanwhile I have a job to do and I need your help, that is why I sent for you again." She spoke as if she were some female Napoleon. I thought of her with Beverlow and then being perhaps thrown on a bed by the tough Aussie.

I was not disgusted, merely surprised and not a little narked. I asked:

"What do I get out of all this?"

Fleur shrugged her shoulder.

"My friendship."

It was on the tip of my tongue to be really, sarcastic but, before I could think of anything nasty enough, Fleur added:

"Don't stand there like a little boy with the solks."

"It's sulks," I corrected her surlily.

"Thank you, *chéri*," she replied shamelessly. "Now to our muttuns; since the body is not Nash Tufton, the chances are they have not got Pat either."

"True."

"But I must pretend it is Nash."

"Agreed."

"And they will present themselves for their orchid in a box at the *Negresco* very soon."

"Yes."

"Then we must act with *grande vitesse*. Come!" Fleur started to get up.

But I sat in the deck chair and pulled her down again.

"One thing, Lemmonier, the gimflick—"

"The what?"

"The gadget—the plan—the whatever it is they are after, you still haven't told me what it is."

Fleur looked at me steadfastly. "No, nor do I intend to."

"Why?"

"Because if they capture you and you know, they will force you to tell them where it is."

"And if I don't know?"

"You will suffer, of course, but since you don't know, how can you tell?" Fleur explained blandly.

"And you?"

"I am a woman."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I can take it more than a man," Fleur averred.

"You weren't so brave when the Senegalese gal Louga was on the trail."

"Louga." Fleur shivered slightly. "Louga certainly scares me," she agreed.

"Then why don't you tell—?"

But now Fleur rose to her feet and put her hand out for mine. I got up too.

"Has my career got anything to do with your refusal to tell me about this gimmick you know of?" I asked her.

Fleur smiled a smile that was even warmer than the local sunshine.

"Tall, strong Garway Trenton, famous writer! You are a nice man."

"And you're a not-so-nice woman. Never mind all the cuddly stuff. Give, Mam, give. All I want are the facts, Mam. Jest gimme the facts'!"

Fleur shook her head.

"But if this—this gimmick can be popped into, a small box it can't be very big."

Fleur looked at me with wide eyes. "Really? But how clever you are, Mr. Trenton. There's your master mind for you!"

"I agree," I replied "that was asinine of me. But it narrows down the field. Animal, mineral or vegetable?"

"It is no good, Trenton, I am not telling you. All

I want you to do is to buy me a nice orchid in a nice box."

"A transparent box?" I asked.

"It could be," Fleur replied, adding, "it's no good Garway, I am adamant."

"If I can't see it and it's in a transparent box, it must be some sort of note or capsule."

"Buy me my orchid, please,"^h Fleur said, swiftly cooling. I sighed pseudo-wearily and we went and bought the orchid. The box was transparent and had a gay ribbon tied in a bow upon it.

"I won't be a moment," Fleur said, going to the ladies cloakroom.

I glared ferociously round the lounge as if all the people present were in league with Master Guafdelli. The room wasn't very full. Some returned my look with astonishment, others paid no regard. All the time I was trying to think what Fleur was putting into the orchid box. A small metal tube? Containing what?

She seemed a long time in the cloakroom but, as I said earlier, there were women who spent ages therein, my favourite gal always seemed to be there an eternity—and I was beginning to be alarmed when Fleur appeared, smiling, urbane.

"So sorry," she said. She spoke quietly in case anyone was listening. "It took a little time to fix."

I shifted my glance to the orchid in its box in her hands.

"You can't see it, Garway, and if you could you've forgotten it's not what they want. It's just to stall a bit."

"You mean they'll have to decipher it?" I guessed.
"Check!"

I looked at the box again. "Is whatever it is, in the silver paper round the stem of the orchid?"

"Check again."

I shook my head. "I'm a nit, I really am a nit. I can't guess it."

"O.K. Mr. Nit, now we write a card with Guardelli's name on it."

This we did and we left the box at Reception to be collected.

"Now do we hide behind a sofa and watch 'em come for it?" I asked facetiously.

"No. Now we go off to find Louga."

"Louga?" I stared disbelievingly at Fleur. "Now we go to buy a Lüger, is that what you mean?" I asked.

"No. I mean what I say. Now we go off to find Louga," Fleur repeated.

"But that's absurd. We've been running from Louga for what seems a century. You're petrified of her—and I'm not sure how I feel—and now we're going to look for her?"

"Exactly!"

"Well—in the words of Charity Stockton—bash me over the head with a Nux bar!"

"Why does Charity say that?"

"Never mind that! let's get back to the point. You say we are going to see Louga."

"Yes."

"But do you know where she is?"

"I think so."

"Will she be expecting us?"

"No, I think she will be very surprised."

"Not half as surprised as I am," I said.

Twenty-one

FOR security reasons we left the Aston and, also for security reasons, we selected a cruising taxi rather than one on the rank. Fleur gave the driver an address and it sounded like some club and I said so. Fleur replied that it was a "*boite*", the *Flip Nap*.

"I hope we can get a sandwich. It's chow time for this ole cowboy," I said.

By now night had enveloped the bright city. It was a balmy evening, the night en fête with gay stars and the smells of the city, French cigarettes, petrol, garbage, pine trees, assailed one's nostrils as the wind dropped.

"You like it here," Fleur said accusingly. As a Parisienne she was scornful.

"Not necessarily Nice but Cannes, Monte, St. Raphael—the coast generally."

Fleur sniffed. "It is O.K. for a few days," she averred. I looked at her wondering could all that had happened to us be within the space of a few hours. I added, "And I particularly like a stretch of the road between St. Maxime's and St. Raphael."

Fleur "got" the message, and smiled that lovely warm, Christmas-tree smile.

"You don't regret stopping?"

"No. Keeps the old adrenalin on the move—good for the health, I'd say, being with you, Lemmonier."

"I hope you'll feel that way after we have 'dealt with Louga.'"

"Now you are making me very nervous."

"Not as nervous as I am," Fleur confessed.

"What will Louga be doing at this 'boite'?" I enquired.

"Singing, I expect."

"Can she sing?"

"By modern standards, she is, how do you say it, groovy?"

"You mean she's got a beat."

"So the customers think."

"Well! Well!" I considered this for a moment, then asked, "and if she isn't singing?"

"She'll be around talking to the customers," Fleur replied.

We reached the *Flip Flap* which was situated in the back streets of Nice. It was a basement "job" and it was peopled by beatniks and weirdies, mostly young with the occasional elderly artist who got a bang out of being with the youngsters. The lighting was deliberately pulled down to candle glow, the murals large and crudely drawn were of scenes of the Left Bank, and, sure enough, illuminated by a single spotlight, was Louga, in tight three-quarter length crimson jeans, a white sweater which emphasised her contour, the

same big brooch at her throat and long ear-rings that swayed to her smoochy beat. A coloured pianist with eyes closed smiled seraphically as she sang and sent him too. She had the same strong sense of rhythm as Bobby Darin, and, indeed if you did not look but listened you would have sworn it was a man. She was jazzing up an old French nursery jingle *Sur le Pont d'Avignon* which we had thought madly swingy when Jean Sablon did it way back. This Louga version was really good, too.

"I dig her, she's really O.K.," I said excitedly, turning to Fleur, to find once more that strange look of fascinated terror on Fleur's face, the look of the rabbit about to be gobbled up by the boa-constrictor. Fleur turned and tried to look nonchalant.

"She's certainly got you on a string," I said. I tried to keep it light. "What do I have to do for you, Mam?"

"Get me her locket," Fleur said.

"Eh?"

"The brooch. I need the brooch," Fleur explained.

"You mean you want me to steal it for you?" I said, "from her jersey?"

"Exactly. You see I couldn't, I simply couldn't," Fleur stuttered.

A light dawned, a great beam of perception made it all suddenly clear.

"You mean Louga's got this thing you pretended to leave in the orchid box?"

Fleur nodded.

"You mean Louga's double-crossed Guardelli?"

"Exactly."

I swore softly.

"How did you know?"

"It'll take too long to tell you now, but you must get it for me."

I swore again. Fleur saw that I was not sure that I could take on this assignment.

"But how about you? She won't be interested in me if you are around," I said blushing.

"I know," said Fleur. "I will wait for you, outside."

"You might be there hours," I said.

"True. I'll make my way back to the *Negresco*," Fleur began, "and—"

But I shook my head vigorously.

"You'll be spirited away when I get there," I said.

"I've seen it all on the movies. No, we must do better than that." I thought for a moment.

"The cafe opposite?" Fleur suggested.

"Dangerous. I know! I noticed a public convenience on the corner, go in there."

"How will I know to come out?"

"I'll shout."

"But if I don't hear you?"

"I'll come in."

"But you can't."

"I expect I'll make it, even if I have to dress up," retorted. But Fleur was not amused. She turned pleadingly.

"You will get the brooch, won't you?"

"If I don't come out by midnight, you'd better get the police, Louga's liable to serve me up as *pâté-maison*."

"Do be careful," she said. She scurried out.

Ostentatiously I made my way down to a little table

by the piano so that I was edged in the spotlight and could be observed by Louga. Her eyes widened as she saw me, narrowed and widened again. She was clearly surprised to see me and she was only vulnerable when she was caught on the wrong foot. She finished her number abruptly to the surprise of the near-somnolent pianist, and, ignoring the loud applause, crossed to me. I deliberately did not rise. I wanted for her to say something and, finding that I wasn't planning on talking, she said:

"What do you want?"

I glanced up at her provocatively, hoping I looked like Robert Mitchum.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, *you!*"

Once again I had caught her off balance. Then, once her eyebrows had returned to normal, she smiled, displaying her splendid teeth. She jerked her head towards a little curtain.

"Let's talk about this, Mister," she said huskily.

In trepidation I followed her.

This for me was either the end of a short career as novelist or the most exciting moment of my life. I followed her into a dingy corridor.

Louga groped for me. "This way, man!" she said aggressively. She groped and she found, and she positively tugged me along the corridor: she kicked open a door, the door to her small dressing room. Sticks of stage make-up, cigarettes, the usual knick-knacks were on a small table, a cupie doll, a rickety chair and a long hange^r rail for clothes made up the room. The room was a blaze of light from a row of naked bulbs round a

large make-up mirror. I expect that mirror had seen some sights. She let me go and crossed to an old theatrical trunk. She was clearly excited.

"What—more scissors?" I said, still hoping I looked desirable to her.

She stopped at the trunk and grinned. "I don't know," she said softly, sinisterly, evilly. She was nympho all right. She was as sexually complicated as a Portuguese man o' war jelly-fish and brother, was that complicated! She continued:

"So how come you're here?"

"I told you. I wanted to see you again."

I hadn't quite sold her on it but she was interested.

"You remind me of Nero's mother," I said.

"I don't want to remind anyone of anyone's mother!" she retorted, then upon reflection enquired, "why Nero's mother?"

"*Si libet licet*," I replied.

"Eh?"

"Latin."

"Phooey to Latin." A pause, then "what's it mean, anyway?"

"If you want to, why not?" I translated.

It made Louga smile, smile a lot.

She picked up a whip from the trunk. I thought 'the contents of that trunk must be fascinating—here was Queen Perversion.' She said:

"You liked me hurting you—didn't you? You enjoyed it. You're a masochist!" She said not accusingly but delightedly. She raised the whip to lash me.

"Now" I said to myself and I leapt forward. I grabbed

her to me and forced my lips on hers. Deliberately she kept her teeth closed. I pulled the hand with the whip down. Suddenly she laughed and I seized my opportunity. I bit her tongue. The pain made her cry out. We broke apart and stood there sizing one another up, panting slightly. I crossed to the light switch and turned them out, leaving the light on in the corridor. I knew she would protest but I was back and had pulled her to the ground saying as I did so, brutally, "I'm shy."

She laughed again. I lifted her jersey and for a moment my hands touched the brooch. But it was too soon to risk grabbing it. She tried to struggle to her feet but I held her down, then I decided to let her know who was running the show. I grabbed at one of her long dangly earrings and with a quick wrench I tore it off. She yelled blue murder then she laughed and it was not a laugh I wanted to hear again for a long, long time. If ever.

Twenty-two

FLEUR must have been waiting at the foot of the convenience for when I ran up to it and gave a Bashan-like yell, she came bounding up the steps.

"Well?" she gasped.

"I got it!" I panted, pressing the brooch into her hand.

"Oh you darling!" she exclaimed. "And Louga, did you kill her to get it?" She was a cool one that one.

"No, whatever I did to her she liked. She was out of breath but happy—"

"But Garway, I hope—"

"No time for chit-chat," I said urgently. A taxi was cruising slowly towards us. I hailed it. It speeded up.

"Not this one!" shouted Fleur warningly. In my excitement I had forgotten the elementary rule, never take the first one, but it was too late. Fleur was half in and someone inside grabbed her and I quickly turned to try to pull her out. Someone hit me hard on the back of the head with the butt of a revolver. It's a silly thing to say but it is true you do see stars when you are hit like that.

"Wow!" I gasped.

I was yanked into the cab by strong callous hands and flung next to Fleur, who was calling out. I felt the business end of a revolver cool the back of my neck.

"Police!" yelled Fleur. "Help! My shoes, I've lost my shoes!" She bent down fumbling for them in the dark. I shook my head, my poor battered head.

"Wow!" I repeated.

"All right, give it to me!" Guardelli commanded.

"Well! Well! This is where we came in!" I quipped. He crashed his fist into my mouth.

"Shut up!" he ordered. The blow cut my lip and I could taste my own blood as it trickled into my mouth.

"Charming!" I said. "A real gent. One of the twelve Paladins!"

Someone, I was to see that it was the Fanatic Axel, shone a torch on to Fleur. She tried to look composed. She had retrieved her shoes and was putting them on with as much dignity as she could muster, but her hair was awry and she was panting hard from her exertions.

"Give!" said Guardelli.

"I don't give you anything," Fleur said.

Guardelli nodded to the Fanatic.

"Search her," he said curtly. The Fanatic closed in to do so and Fleur gave in.

"Is this what you want?" she asked holding out the brooch. The torch shone on the gay brilliants which danced and gleamed under its beam.

"Aha! So that's where it is, eh? Louga, eh? The double-crossing . . . !"

The Fanatic grabbed at the brooch and held it tightly.

"Stop the taxi!" he ordered. The Fanatic, his revolver still at the ready opened the glass partition and told the driver whom I also recognised as being one of Guardelli's boyos, to pull up.

Now Guardelli talked in Italian to the Fanatic Axel who nodded. I heard the name Louga twice. Before he left the cab he waited until Guardelli had his gun out.

"I will kill you if you try to leave the cab," Guardelli said, too coolly to be bluffing.

"You know something? I believe you!" I replied. The Fanatic went off presumably to despatch the sensational Senegalese. I could tell the way Fleur glanced at me that she was wondering if Louga had a chance. It was something I really couldn't answer, after making love a woman, unlike a man, likes to lie awake and drowse and re-dream. . . .

The taxi re-started.

"You don't think we hadn't got you under observation at the *Negresco*?" Guardelli said boastfully.

"Excuse me, I'm a writer, you know, I find your double negatives too baffling," I said jibingly. It was the sort of remark Guardelli didn't take to. He leaned forward.

"You laugh at me Mister Trenton," he said, "and I break your nose with this gun." He held it up close to my face. I grimaced.

"You understand?"

"I understand."

"Sir!" he reminded me.

I did not reply. I hated to kow-tow to the little eye-tie wicker basket.

"Sir!" he repeated and moved forward again.

"Trenton, please!" Fleur said in an assumed gaiety, "you're a nice looking man, stay that way!"

"O.K.," I said, I turned to him and said as unhumblly as I could "Sir."

"That's better."

"Where to, now?" I enquired, "the old familiar places, your hide-out?"

"I do not have to tell you anything, Mister Trenton, *anything!*"

"That's true."

"Now that you have what you want, what is the point of keeping us?" Fleur enquired.

"I want to be sure that your friend Lord Beverlow does not bother me," Guardelli replied.

"Hostages, eh?"

"Exactly." Guardelli agreed, adding, "by the way, that was foolish of you to put the wrong film into the capsule. It took us only a short time to discover your bluff."

"By the way," Fleur retorted, using the same words as Guardelli, "it was foolish of you to pretend that the headless corpse—was it your man who was killed at your hide-out?—was Nash Tufton, the Australian. It took us only a short time to discover you were bluffing."

Guardelli laughed. "It was a neat idea. I am surprised you found out. How did you do it?"

"I am too much of a lady to tell you," Fleur replied, "besides, you might try it again and I might want to be sure once more!"

"So it *was* microfilm!" I said to Fleur.

"Yes."

Guardelli was intrigued.

"Didn't you know?"

"No," I replied.

"She did not tell you? Did she not trust you?" Guardelli taunted. "How amusing. Yes I find that most amusing."

"Good show!"

"Then I will show you what all the fuss was about."

He held out the brooch tantalisingly. "Fancy she did not tell you. Fancy that." He clucked admiringly at Fleur Lemmonier who was staring at the brooch as if willing it back into her possession.

The taxi sped through the town and along the Inférieur Corniche.

"Fancy booful Louga double-crossing you!" I jeered at Guardelli.

"I expect by this time she knows it was a silly thing to do."

"You can't kill people and think you can get away with it, Guardelli," Fleur said.

"No? In a *boite* like that—a few angry words, the lights go out, a shot is fired—who can say how it happened?"

"We will testify!" Fleur blazed at him angrily. Again this appealed to Guardelli's sense of humour.

"You are in no position to dictate to me," he said. He turned to the Fanatic and spoke rapidly in Italian. I caught a word here and there. The conversation was

about the yacht at Villefranche. So we were going aboard!

"Taking us for a little sea voyage, *sir*?" I asked, with a lot of sarcasm on the *sir*, but Guardelli didn't get it.

"Yes. Once we are clear and provided you two behave, I will put you into a little boat and you will make your way ashore," he said. I sniffed. I doubted it, this boyo was as twisted as a post office pen nib.

"That's nice of you. Getting weak in your old age, or worried about international police?"

"I told you to shut your mouth."

"Yes, *sir*!" I replied even more insolently. Even Guardelli realized it was insolent and he hit me on the side of the face with his gat. I could hear Fleur's involuntary gasp. It took me all my time not to throw myself at him.

"Garway!" Fleur shouted, appealing to me.

"O.K. O.K.!" I said, "I'm counting up to ten!"

"Make it a hundred!" she suggested. My head was still throbbing from the bash I had received, my lips had begun to swell up and now there was a bad bruise on my cheek. I must have looked like something out of a Hammer horror film.

"When we get to Villefranche, we are going to my yacht. If either of you calls for help I will shoot. I will shoot the woman first whichever one of you calls out," Guardelli averred, looking at me.

"You've made your point, my old mate!" I said acquiescently.

"Shut your trap!"

"Yes, *sir*!"

"Shut your trap!"

"Yes, *sir!*"

Once again Guardelli spoke in Italian and when the taxi stopped he said to Fleur and me, "You will stroll to the launch and you will get in it, understand?"

There was nothing else we could do. The proximity of the mobsters' betsys made it imperative that we obeyed. There were few people on the quayside, the nearest a reclining couple who paid no regard to our posse. I reflected how times had changed; once upon a time lovers were reticent and shy but not any more; today it was almost the reverse. They necked, loved, grabbed one another, almost deliberately picking the bright lights, the crowded places, railway trains, parks, street corners. . . . We walked a short distance to a launch where two men waited in the stern and one on the quayside, occasionally pushing the bows clear. The engine was chugging and, as soon as we were aboard, we made off for the yacht I had noticed in the harbour that first evening I had brought Fleur from St. Maxime's to Villefranche.

Over complemented, the launch lay low in the water but we made good time to the yacht. Another thug was at the companion way and we made our way up on deck without talk. I thought the man on board was heavily muffled for a summer night but a breeze had sprung up and Fleur's teeth were chattering. Whether because of this or fear I knew not, but I squeezed her arm reassuringly thinking "A fat lot of good that'll do her. Think, Trenton, think how you are going to get out of this little lark"—for I did not believe that

they would cast us adrift. That was strictly Piazza San Marco stuff—or if they did, we would be all set for the deep six, the wooden overcoat—the sea would be briny but we wouldn't smell it—in other words, we knew too much about Master Guardelli. I hoped Fleur hadn't considered all this, but I suspected that she had.

We were pushed down into a small cabin. Guardelli gave orders to up-anchor, and only Guardelli and two other of his henchmen remained.

When they had gone he grinned exultantly at Fleur then he shifted his gaze to me and sneered. I smiled back urbanely at him.

"Perhaps you would like to see what it is you nearly won," Guardelli said, holding out Louga's brooch.

"I've been told it's microfilm, but I'd like to know what's on the film."

"Buried treasure!" Guardelli said, exultantly.

"Eh?"

"A map of buried treasure as easy to pick up as it is to kill you," Guardelli imparted wildly.

I turned to Fleur for confirmation. She sat tight-lipped, saying nothing, but she nodded agreement at this.

"Look!" said Guardelli. He switched on a small lamp over a table which swung a little as the yacht started for the open sea, her engines throbbing, then, putting the brooch down on the table, he turned it over and opened the back. *There was nothing in it.* He uttered an amazed gasp. So, too, did Fleur. There was a murmur from the others. Then in a fury Guardelli turned on Fleur.

"You dirty bitch!" he screamed. "Where is it?"

If Fleur was acting she was doing a mighty fine job.

"Well! Well! So Louga wasn't so dumb, after all!" I said with a chuckle. Guardelli turned to me but as if sensing I was trying to deflect him from his purpose, he changed his mind and continued to Fleur.

"I said where is it?"

Fleur still continued to look with astonishment at the empty brooch.

"It's—it's not there!" she said brokenly. "It's not there!"

"Did it mean so very much to you?" I enquired, gently, but still Fleur continued to stare. A sudden smack in the face from Guardelli brought her to. She looked at him in surprise and then cried out in pain. An angry red mark appeared on her lovely face.

"That'll be enough of that, Guardelli," I shouted. He turned to me and loosed all his pent-up rage in cursing me.

"Oh it will, will it you—!" he screamed. "Hold him so that I can kick him where it will hurt most!" He ordered his Boy Scouts. They grabbed me and I just had time to say before Guardelli raised his leg, "Why haven't you searched me? I may have it. Take me out and search me." Guardelli stopped. I had said the first thing that I could think of to save time and how that boomeranged for me! Guardelli smiled evilly.

"Of course! Of course! One of them has it—but which one? We will see." He turned to Fleur. "Take off your clothes!" he ordered.

"Hey, steady on!" I said fatuously.

"Hey, steady on!" he mimicked, "take yours off, too. Both of you take off everything. I think I know where the capsule is," he said foully, "and I will have it, you will see, so waste no more time. You think you can fool Guardelli?"

Neither I nor Fleur moved.

"You heard me!" screamed Guardelli, "take off your clothes!"

Again neither Fleur nor I moved. Guardelli took a Wesson Detective Special from a desk drawer and he aimed it at me. Straight at the heart; I felt quite a 'nana.

"I said take off your clothes!" Guardelli repeated. Still I did nothing, but I could hear the beats of my heart pounding, pounding. . . .

Guardelli raised the gat and, aiming just to the left of me, fired. It was far too close to be amusing. Fleur screamed in fear.

"That was a warning: I only give *one* warning. Now, take off your clothes!" Guardelli ordered.

I still stubbornly stood there. O.K. he wasn't bluffing but the degradation for Fleur and me nude in front of those filthy grinning bastards. . . . Then, as if realising that I wouldn't make the first move, Fleur slowly began to take her clothes off, saying "Don't worry, Gar', it is a very little thing to do really in front of very little people. In a moment it will be over. In a very short while." She said it with such dignity that I could tell even Guardelli was impressed and even a little ashamed. Slowly we divested ourselves of our clothes, as Guardelli's thugs began to snigger broadly.

"Of course," Guardelli said, "if you'd rather give me the map you can stop."

And then, just as we were on the point of nudity, the door suddenly crashed open and as Guardelli turned and his henchmen raised their guns, Ned Beverlow with a Sten in hand gently sprayed them with lead. There were screams and a choking sound as all three went down.

Following Ned into the cabin came Perce and Len, also plus ample cutlery and a newcomer whose name I didn't find it hard to guess.

"Well, well!" I drawled. "Hurray for the United States Marines. Saved by that J. Arthur Rank gong! 'Put on your clothes, honey, here's yo' man!'"

"I only winged 'em," the Lord Beverlow said suavely, "to keep 'em quiet."

And then Fleur, forgetting decorum in her excitement, in bra and panties, rushed across past Neddie Beverlow straight into the arms of Nash Tufton the Australian.

Twenty-three

I COULD instantly see why Fleur had fallen for him. He was a giant of a man with jet black curly hair and shoulders that wide, no! THAT wide and a smile as gay as Louis Jourdan. Man he was tall and handsome and a real animal. He was a gorgeous Hunk. I could picture Fleur Lemmonier sharing his baked beans by a billabong—or was that the thing the beans were cooked in? Yes, Nash Tufton was all male, beside him the cultured Lord Beverlow and the quasi-cultural Trenton looked like pigmies and I may say I was tall in my saddle (and my Polo handicap six).

Fleur was half-laughing, half-crying. Neddie Beverlow's mouth opened and closed in perplexity and he swallowed a couple of times. Then he looked from the couple in one another's arms over to me as if to say "Well, chum, we're certainly in the same boat—and it's well and truly adrift."

"Well, stap me!" his Lordship said succinctly. He repeated it. "Stap me!" he said.

"Me, too," I replied, "but at any rate I've got my little dog Toby to keep *me* warm!"

"Youki!" Fleur corrected me in a muffled voice,

snuggled as she was on Nash Tufton's shoulder. And you're forgetting someone else?" she added accusingly.

"Huh?"

"Your fiancée Charitable Stockton on Tees at Ventimiglia." Fleur reminded me.

"You're the tease, I told you," I retorted. I turned to Ned. "How did you get possession of this boat?" I asked.

"Too long to tell you at the moment. However, now that this little fracas is over, let us discuss the microfilm of those nice little gold bars."

"Big gold bars, guv, the way I heard it," Nash corrected Ned.

"Correction, as Nash Tufton puts it, big gold bars, we hope—I—" but his Lordship got no further, the muffled man from the deck hurried into the cabin. He was another of Ned's men, apparently. He said curtly:

"Police patrol boat coming up fast, sir. Starboard bow."

"O.K. Charlie, thanks!" His Lordship turned to me. "Look here, Trenton, you're not involved in this and I think you're better off out of the way—"

"Don't I get my share of the loot?"

"No! They tell me you're stacked, anyway!" Nash broke in.

"All these ugly rumours!" I signed.

"No smoke without fire!" Nash reminded me.

"Of all the fatuous—" I began but Ned Beverlow broke in quickly with:

"Look! No time to gab. If you took the launch and made off the port side you'd stand a good chance."

"Taking me with him." Fleur added.

Ned looked at the others. After a brief pause, they all nodded.

"O.K. Fleur. Check in at the *Ruhl*. We can meet up there after any investigation."

"Any investigation!" Nash whistled incredulously. "Aren't there some kops to account for?"

"Three wounded men here," He turned to me. "The others have some—er—light bruises and are bound and gagged forrard."

"Nice work!"

"But the bloke killed up at Guardelli's hideaway?"

Here Fleur broke in. "They chopped his head off, tattooed his arm and tried to put the pressure on me, kidding me they had you to get me to give them the plan—"

"So he's in the morgue, poor guy, unknown and he doesn't have to be accounted for. But the others up there?"

There was silence for a moment. "Who can say?" Tufton said.

"About the microfilm"—Nash began, "so Louga's still got it?"

"That we don't—"

"Look!" Beverlow cut in, "you two'll never make it unless you hurry."

"Yep, get going, Hon'," Nash said to Fleur. He pulled her to him and kissed her very fiercely.

It embarrassed Lord Beverlow who looked over at me.

"Correct me if I am wrong, Trenton, but I have the impression we put that girl on a 'plane for London the night before last."

I grinned. "I thought so too. Come on, Lemmonier, let us depart," I suggested.

Topside Beverlow's men had brought the motor launch round to the port side in the shadow. The police launch were now using their searchlight and, as Fleur and I clambered into the motor boat, they fired a warning shot across the bows of the yacht.

"Ho hum!" I said—I hoped cheerfully. "You don't 'arf get me into trouble, mate."

"Yes, mate, don't I?" Fleur agreed, "but you do enjoy it, don't you, mate?"

"That's a leading question, Lemmonier, and I positively refuse to answer it without first consulting my lawyer."

We were now on our way chugging shorewards, covered from the police by the yacht.

"Tell me, Trenton, do you need a lawyer to answer this question: Have you ever considered marrying a French woman?"

"Often!" I promptly replied.

"But *this* one."

"Eh?"

"Me." Fleur said, pointing a finger at herself. My eyes must have boggled.

"You?"

"Yes. Wouldn't you like that?"

"You 'choke' with me, Lemmonier."

"No, I don't joke with you, mate," she replied quite tenderly.

"But what about Lord Beverlow *and* Nash Tufton, I mean, steady on, *mate!*"

"I think it's you I really love, Trenton, you've taken great care of me," Fleur said warmly, innocently, delightfully. I looked ahead at the fast-approaching shoreline and altered course slightly, thinking all the time of this—the strangest proposal I had ever had and, old bighead that I am, I'd had a few.

"You know something, I'm either bonkers or you're the most exciting, sexy, delicious, two-timing *villainess* I've ever met!" I said.

"Who me?"

"You innocent *witch* you! You are the most *éblouissante*, wickedest woman in the world, *bar none!* But I will concede you're also very adorable."

"Which means you will marry me?"

"No I bloody well won't. But Lemmonier, Mam, thanks heaps for asking me."

Fleur sniffed. "All men are beasts!" she said. "Well," she qualified it, "some of the time."

"Now there, at last, you tell the truth!"

We reached the shore and safety and we stood looking back at the yacht. It had now hove-to, sensibly without a fight, and the police launch was alongside.

"How will it go?" I asked Fleur but she shrugged her shoulders.

"Just a gang fight. Some words, some broken heads. What else have the police on them?"

"So they'll be along any time now?"

"Good heavens, no!" Fleur said. "I don't suppose we'll see them for several months. And then Louga and maybe some men at the Hide-out. Maybe several years!"

I uttered an exclamation.

"We can't wait in the *Ruhl Hotel*, Nice, for several years!" I said.

"I don't see why not," Fleur replied imperturbably, "I am always prepared to wait a long time for Nash."

"But, I've got a book to write—" I protested.

"Where better to write it than the South of France—?"

She had a good point there but I wouldn't cross Nash. "And see a gal called "Tee" in London," I added.

"And what about your Charitable Stockton?" Fleur reminded me.

"You've got me!"

"I have *not* got you," she said, adding "not to mention Youki—"

"Toby!" I corrected her.

"Youki!" she insisted.

I kissed her. It stopped her talking. Then, suddenly, I remembered.

"And what about the microfilm?"

Fleur looked at me as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

"Fleur!" I said sternly. "I know you too well now

for you to try to kid me. You can fool the others, maybe, but not me!"

Still Fleur continued to look innocent.

"By the way, what was the buried treasure and where was it?"

"Gold bars, looted in '42 by the Italians after the Allies invaded Sicily. A group of Italians got away with it in an E Boat but they were torpedoed off the coast at Messina. One of them made a plan, had it photographed, destroyed the plan because it was too vulnerable and kept the microfilm. When he was captured by the Australian—"

"Wait a moment!" I said, "this begins to plop into place. Who was the Italian—Guardelli?"

"Of course. Corporal Guardelli, he was in those days."

"And the Aussies who captured them—was one Nash Tufton?"

"Exactly, *chéri*, Sergeant Tufton that was."

"And?"

"It seems Guardelli was always ambitious. He had lots of plans, mostly black market. He found captivity intolerable—that the word, darling?"

"'Intolerable' is perfect."

"—so he made a pact. He shewed Nash the microfilm and convinced him it was genuine."

"Was it?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And Nash let him escape."

"What?"

Fleur grinned. "Quite a guy this Aussie-type." Fleur said.

"Guardelli did well on the black market and Sergeant Tufton was court-martialled?"

"Guardelli certainly made a fortune but Nash managed to evade losing his stripes."

"So Guardelli was now free, and later, after the Italians became our chum^sie-wumsies against the Germans, Guardelli was after Nash Tufton who was after that treasure."

"That, Trenton, is correct."

"But how do you and Beverlow come into all this?"

"Nash hadn't enough money to—"

"To 'go it' alone?"

"Yes, thank you, go it alone, so he needed a rich partner. Someone out for adventure. He put an advertisement into the papers—English, French, Italian."

"Guardelli saw the one in Italian and thought this could be the man with the microfilm of the map?" I hazarded.

"Yes."

"And Neddie Beverlow reading his ⁷ and jumped at the chance. All that is fine," I said, "and it all adds up. All except one thing. And that is you? You read it in French?"

"No, my editor did."

"Your what?"

"My editor. I am a journalist. I'm sorry not to have told you before. Was that dishonesty?"

I considered this for a moment.

"I don't think so. Scott Fitzgerald said—putting it, I think, into the mouth of Gatsby, 'dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply'."

Fleur grimaced.

"So?" I said enquiringly, "then?"

"Then my editor sent for me—I'm on the picture weekly, *Maintenant*. He thought there might be a story behind the advertisement."

"How right he was."

"When I contacted Nash Tufton I posed as a rich woman, in fact, for the time being, I was rich, I had all the resources of *Maintenant* behind me, you see! After Nash had checked credentials—or so he said—the rendezvous was St. Tropez."

"It would be St. Tropez!" I chuckled.

"Guardelli came along in his fine yacht."

"With Louga?"

"No, Louga was singing at St. Trop', then had an engagement at Nice at the *Flip-Flap*—that is how I knew where to find her. Guardelli may have had her on his payroll, I don't know. Neddie Beverlow arrived in his yacht and there was little me in a hired Renault which we must collect from St. Trop' some time."

"I take it if the adventure proved interesting, you would take pictures and have the exclusive story?"

"That is right, but later, when I realized what we were after, I knew that this was more than just an adventure story."

"But how did you know that the microfilm was in the brooch that Louga wore?" I asked Fleur. She looked at me with amused tolerance.

"Because," she said, "I put it there!"

"Eh?" I stuttered incredulously, repeating, parrot-like, "You put it there!" I flipped! What a woman!

"*Mais oui, chéri.* I thought it would be the safest place in the world. The others were always bickering and trying to steal it from Nash, so one day I put it into the back of Louga's locket."

"Man alive. How did you manage that?" I ejaculated.

"It was easy. She was always coming to Neddie's yacht, swimming and all that. I'd no idea why—I soon found out! It was a simple matter to hide the capsule."

"And all the time you were being squired by Beverlow, Tufton and you. . . ."

"Now Trenton, pray do not be crude." Fleur cut in composedly, "remember I was engaged to Neddie Beverlow."

"Yes. That must have been mighty swift!"

"It was," Fleur agreed imperturbably, "he took one look at me and was a—how do you say—gonner!"

"I don't know where you learned your English, but, Mam, you sort of genned-up, didn't you?" I said admiringly.

"*Comment?*"

"Skip it. So the debonair Lord Beverlow fell hook, line and sinker—"

"In a matter of hours."

I thought about it all for a moment and then remembered another point.

"So when you said Tufton had it, you knew all the

time that it was concealed—*unknown to her*—on Louga!”

“Exactly, *chéri*, ingenious, wasn’t I?”

“Madame you can say that again. I certainly dig that.”

“Dig?”

It was going to be too difficult to translate it so I skipped it. Instead I said:

“When Beverlow rescued us at Guardelli’s, Tufton and the man they called Pat were still on board Beverlow’s yacht?”

“Exactly. Then Guardelli thinking I had the map tried to bluff us with the headless corpse.” Fleur explained.

I nodded. It certainly dove-tailed. I looked seawards and saw that the police launch was heading towards the quay.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“We are going to the Hotel *Ruhl*?” Fleur enquired.

“Why not?”

“Why not indeed! When we get there—”

“Yes?”

“I must phone my paper,” Fleur said antiphrastically.

* * *

day of fabulous sunshine

on the blue, blue Mediterranean,

I collected the Aston and drove Fleur along that gay coast to St. Tropez to pick up the rented Renault.

There had been a short account in the papers of the police picking up two rival gangs whom it was said, were engaged in contraband in Italian cigarettes which had amused Fleur and me more than somewhat. Of the fate of Louga there was no mention.

As we drove slowly along out past the airport towards Juan les Pins, I said to Fleur: "Do you think they killed Louga?"

"I hope not. She terrified me but I do not wish her dead. That would be my fault because in a way I double-crossed her. After all she had no idea she had the plan. I certainly twisted Guardelli on that. Poor Louga!"

"She was an animal animal, that one!"

"A what?"

"An animal animal!" I repeated.

"You can say that again!" Fleur averred.

"But I've said it twice already."

"What is that, the English joke?"

"Could be." I reconsidered all that Fleur had told me, then said: "If she was killed then the men who went after her when we were bundled into the taxi now have the microfilm. And, when Guardelli is freed, they'll be able to get the gold bullion after all?"

"No," Fleur said, "my paper is going to see that Guardelli gets all he deserves; furthermore, we will see that the gold bars go back to the rightful owners."

"Some Italian bank perhaps?"

"In any case," Fleur said, "they couldn't have found the microfilm map."

"Why not?"

"Because I have it," Fleur said.

"What?" I yelled. I quickly looked at her in surprise.

"Pay attention to the road, *chéri*!" Fleur cautioned.

"You are about to hit a Dauphine head on."

I corrected our road position and turned to her again.

"You have the map."

"Of course."

"Well—"

"'Stop me', wasn't that the expression Neddie Beverlow used?"

"O.K. Stop me it is." I stopped the Aston and reflected. "Then I was on the beam. Ah! When you lost your shoes in the taxi, you—?"

"*C'est ça!* I just had time to hide the microfilm. That fool Guardelli just gave me long enough—if only he had known!" Fleur took off one shoe. She unscrewed the heel. It was hollow and she tipped the contents out on to the palm of her hand. There was the little metal capsule. Fleur opened it and showed me the microfilm.

I grinned. "All that effort, Lemmonier, for that little—"

"Gimmick, is the word, Trenton, gimmick."

I laughed and I simply couldn't help kissing her again.

"And Youki?"

"Toby?" I corrected her. "Once I get his feet fixed up you shall have him as a souvenir. It'll give me a reason for coming over to Paris."

Fleur grimaced. "Thank you very much. No, Trenton, you went back for him. I think it is only fair that you keep him."

TOUCH A FRENCH POM-POM

"Thanks, I'd like that." I thought over the events of the event-packed trip along the coast and remembered. "Don't forget to remind me to post my sister's season ticket to her, will you?" I said.

Let's hang on to it, for a moment," Fleur suggested, "you never know when we might need it again!"